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Investigating the Responses of Gay Gen Z and Gen Y Men
to Homosexual Imagery in Advertising

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Marketing and Entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

The LGBTQ+ market is growing and expanding, especially now that younger generations who have a higher percentage of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, are entering the market. While there exists a growing body of literature regarding gay representation in advertising, little research has explored how younger cohorts of gay men—particularly those in Generations Z and Y—respond to gay representation in conservative environments (in particular, regions where the majority public opinion and/or legislation rejects the normalization of LGBTQ+ identities). To address this question, this study aimed to explore the responses of gay Gen Z and Gen Y men towards their own representation in advertising. This research considers this demographic's reactions to gay male representation in advertising, and their internalizations of these reactions, and does so within a population with a high concentration of Gen Z and Gen Y individuals residing in a regionally conservative political culture.

INTRODUCTION

The LGBTQ+ market is growing and expanding, especially now that younger generations, which have a higher concentration of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, are coming of age and entering the market. According to a 2020 Gallup study of over 15,000 participants (Jones, 2021), 9% of Millennials and 16% of Gen Z identify as LGBTQ+. The purchasing power and influence of these demographics are also increasing as Gen Z come of age and Millennials continue to saturate professional fields (Munsch, 2021). Additionally, with American societal values shifting over the last fifty years, marketers have begun to consider the LGBTQ+ demographic as a market segment. The LGBTQ+ market holds a long history of economic citizenship (Eisend & Hermann, 2019) by choosing to support businesses which align with their personal values, particularly in favor of LGBTQ+ friendly policies. What is more, there exists a common stereotype of gay¹ men as “dream consumers” with excess spending money and a taste for high-end consumption (Tsai, 2011). Due to the growth and rise (or perhaps more importantly the perceived rise) in purchasing potential of the LGBTQ+ market (Eisend & Hermann, 2019), as well as the perception of gay men as high-spending consumers, companies have spent the last few decades developing marketing activities to address the LGBTQ+ demographic segment, and research has kept in pace.

A recent meta-analysis of the literature on how LGBTQ+ people are represented in advertisements found significant differences between the ways subsegments of the LGBTQ+ demographic respond to LGBTQ+ representation in advertising (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). For example, this research finds that gay men tend to identify with their homosexuality before

¹ Though the words ‘queer’ and ‘gay’ hold different meanings, where ‘queer’ often functions as a fluid umbrella term to describe any non-heterosexual, non-cisgender person (Peters, 2005), and preference of each or other labels differs from person to person, this paper will use the word ‘gay’ as an umbrella term to refer to any queer man (inclusive of non-binary people) who experience same-sex attraction.

anything else (such as gender, race, etc.) and with the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, whereas lesbian women primarily identify with both their homosexuality and gender (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). The differences between lesbian women and gay men extend to the persuasiveness of imagery as well, where gay men are persuaded by gay male imagery more than lesbian imagery (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Further, the research finds that gay male imagery is more persuasive to gay men when utilized in advertisements for hedonic, high involvement products (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Hedonic representation in particular falls in line with the aforementioned stereotype of gay men as wealthy and brand-loyal with a taste for luxury spending, and the researched phenomenon of gay men incorporating luxury consumption into their self-concepts (Dib & Johnson, 2019).

Another proposal for how gay men perceive representation in advertising revolves around implicit vs. explicit imagery (Tsai, 2011). Gay men are more likely to perceive implicit cues to homosexual representation in advertising when the cues use gay men than are lesbians given the same advertisement (in other words, gay men recognize other gay men more easily than lesbians recognize gay men, and vice versa). In this research, implicit representation denotes any representation wherein cues of homosexuality are presented in a manner where gay consumers might perceive them and understand the advertisement as gay, but heterosexual consumers are less likely to (such as showing two men shopping for a couch without ever demonstrating any affection to each other verbally or physically) (Tsai, 2011). Explicit representation denotes any representation wherein cues of homosexuality are presented in a manner where any consumer will perceive them (such as depicting men kissing, getting married, acting as a pair of parents, or demonstrating sexual attraction to other men).

LGBTQ+ representation can also cause different effects on heterosexual consumers; it has more negative effects on heterosexual consumers in conservative cultural landscapes (such as the Bible Belt of the USA) than it does in liberal landscapes (such as Los Angeles county) (Eisand & Hermann, 2019). For example, in conservative cultures, lesbian imagery is less likely to cause negative responses in heterosexual male consumers than gay male imagery; and implicit gay male imagery is advised over explicit within these environments. Gay men of past studies also react more favorably to implicit imagery over explicit in these environments, whereas gay men in more liberal areas of high gay density (such as gay neighborhoods) are more critical of implicit gay representation and the practice of “gay window advertising” (Tsai, 2012), a practice where implicit advertising is exclusively used to avoid negative backlash from heterosexual consumers. Furthermore, the aforementioned meta-analysis finds that gay consumers are generally more persuaded by portrayals of homosexuality in advertising than by portrayals of heterosexuality in culturally conservative cultures (Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

The finding that gay consumers prefer explicit rather than implicit imagery conflicts with prior research suggesting that there are no differences in persuasiveness between implicit and explicit portrayals of homosexuality in advertising (e.g., Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee, 2005; 2008). Recognizing that explicit gay imagery has the risk of resulting in negative backlash effects for heterosexual consumers and believing that implicit portrayals were just as effective as explicit portrays, many marketers present implicit gay imagery in advertising (Um, 2012). The recent findings suggesting that explicit imagery is preferred by gay consumers may lead marketers to reassess whether implicit appeals should be used in targeting gay consumers. Eisend & Hermann (2019) call for advertisers to do a better job of portraying gay consumers in mainstream advertising and treating them like a valuable target segment by portraying them in

ads in an explicit fashion (p. 396). Additionally, though many marketers have reserved explicit representation for gay media, it has been reported that gay media reaches less than 50% of LGBT+ population whereas mainstream media reaches 90% (Um, 2016). Consequently, marketers are likely motivated to use mainstream media to reach gay consumers. Yet, a strategy targeting gay consumers via explicit portrayals in mainstream media is also particularly risky in a masculine or politically conservative culture, as heterosexual consumers respond negatively to homosexual images in advertising (Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

Though advertisers remain wary of alienating their majority heterosexual consumers in conservative regions, the inclusion of gay representation in advertising comes as part of the larger movement in marketing and advertising towards more inclusive, diverse, and representative advertising. Many researchers have made cases for including representation based on the effects that negative representation or a lack of representation can have on consumers (Åkestam, et al. 2021), especially considering gender, race, body type, and sexuality, and/or when representation involves stereotypes. As Royne Stafford and Pounders (2021) reiterate, “it is well documented that underrepresentation can be detrimental to consumer well-being and this work suggests that although portrayals are beginning to shift, print advertisements should aim for increased diversity and inclusivity in terms of race, age, body type, and active roles” (p. 489).

A recent content analysis on gender roles in advertising concludes that gender in advertising is stereotyped (Eisend, 2019). These stereotypes can incite positive or negative effects, where positive effects occur when gender portrayals are perceived as congruent with a consumer’s schema and gender-role expectations and negative effects occur when gender portrayals are perceived as incongruent (Eisend, 2019; Jaffe and Berger, 1994). For example, a male consumer who tends to see men as falling into the role of the masculine provider would

likely respond positively to the representation of a man working a traditionally masculine job, such as a construction worker, to provide for his family; and negatively to a man working a feminine job, such as a drag performer, working solely for self-actualization. Conversely, a man who believes that typical gender roles should be broken would respond more positively to the latter example and more negatively to the former.

Though the effects of stereotypical advertising on women is well researched, less research investigates the effect of stereotypical representation on men—in particular, the heteronormative role of men as stoic, masculine household providers (Eisand, 2019). Eisand argues that while the roles of men in society have evolved, where more men are taking on caregiver roles instead of sole provider roles, stereotypical depictions of men have remained prominent in advertising. One study (Gentry and Harrison, 2010) proposes that perpetuating traditional stereotypes of masculinity in advertising can lead to mental and physical health problems in men, including an increase of anxiety and decrease in self-esteem. Eisand (2019) calls for qualitative research on consumer stereotype assessment to determine how they respond to and evaluate stereotypical representation; he also calls for advertisers to represent individuals who fit outside of the binary gender role concept. Similar to gender and gender roles, ethnic representation can also have a powerful effect on validating racial and ethnic minorities (Peñaloza, 2018), by function that it explicitly depicts and addresses minority consumers as part of the company's desired market, ultimately including them into the marketplace and, by extension, society.

There exists a debate within marketing over whether advertising shapes or simply reflects the values of its culture (Eisand, 2019), often called the “mirror” and “mold” arguments. The mirror argument states that advertising simply reflects the current values of its culture without

affecting any change. It relies on the idea that any effect advertising might have on a culture is negligible compared to the other, larger forces at work. According to this theory, stereotypes or diverse representation are the effect of their culture and cannot act as the cause for change. In contrast, the mold argument states that advertising reinforces values held by a culture, and that changing advertising can cause those values to evolve.

Though these two arguments still compete with each other, it remains that stereotypical representations of gender roles and ethnicity can affect consumers in negative and positive ways; and while advertisements have increased in their inclusion of the LGBTQ+ demographic over the years, gay representation in advertising seems to have reached a saturation point, with only certain members of the LGBTQ+ community represented in persistent, stereotypical ways (Tsai, 2011); for example, white gay men as “dream consumers,” bisexual women who can “have it all,” and feminine “lesbian chic,” “lipstick” lesbians.

While there exists a growing body of literature regarding gay representation in advertising, little research has explored how younger cohorts of gay men—particularly those in Generations Z and Y—respond to gay representation in conservative environments (in particular, regions where the majority public opinion and/or legislation rejects the normalization of LGBTQ+ identities). With more and more gay youth coming of age within conservative environments and engaging with brands through the internet, marketers will benefit to understand how this large cohort with growing economic potential responds to various forms of gay representation. To address this question, and because of the lack of theory to guide research on how the latest generation of gay men living in conservative environments perceives gay representation in advertising, the researchers of this paper conducted an inductive, theory-building study described in the Method section. This study aimed to explore the responses of gay

Gen Z and Gen Y men towards their own representation in advertising with the aim of providing insights to marketers such that ads which more fully resonate with gay male Gen Z and Gen Y consumers might be created. This research considers this demographic's reactions to gay male representation in advertising, and their internalizations of these reactions, and does so within a population with a high concentration of Gen Z and Gen Y individuals residing in a regionally conservative political culture. Though the initial goal was to explore how gay representation is perceived in general, the themes which emerged were overwhelmingly concerned with diversity. This qualitative study will help fill in the gaps in the body of literature and give future studies insight on what realms of interest to delve deeper into. It may also give marketing managers ideas on how to better represent gay men in more effective ways.

METHOD

Research Design

The paradigmatic approach adopted for this study was qualitative positivism (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Yin, 2014), an ontological perspective that focuses on “searching, through non-statistical means, for regularities and causal relationships between different elements of [...] reality, before summarizing identified patterns” (Bonache & Festing, 2020, p. 105).

As described in the introduction, there are important omissions in the research examining gay representation in advertisements, which suggest that an exploratory, partially-inductive approach, rather than a deductive, theory-testing design, is more appropriate. The partially-inductive approach involves generating theoretical models and insights by combining a focal literature with context-rich data (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). It is appropriate when “the phenomena are little known, the literature is still very thin, and thus it is difficult to formulate precise hypotheses” a priori (Huy, 2012: 283).

The flexibility, richness, and granularity of qualitative data makes this approach well-suited for examining perceptions of gay representation in advertising. Qualitative data obtained from interviews allows for the study of this type of phenomenon at a depth not possible using other methods (Graebner et al., 2012).

Data Collection

Semi-structured depth interviews of gay men were conducted with the intention of exploring their opinions on gay representation in advertisements. All informants were between the ages of 18-40 at the time of interview and have lived in the American South for at least six years.

Recruitment

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, recruiting informants was challenging; a variety of recruitment methods were attempted and three proved to be successful. In all methods, the purpose and methodology of the study, as well as the roughly 20% chance of winning a \$150 incentive (Visa gift card), were communicated to each potential informant. The general purpose and methodology of the study were summarized as a 60–90-minute interview to explore their reactions to gay representation in advertising. Participants were assured their identities would remain confidential.

The first recruitment method involved directly approaching the primary investigator's pool of acquaintances, which resulted in six participants. Most of these participants were students at UTC except for two; all lived in Chattanooga for most of the year. These participants were approached face-to-face, over social media, or through text messages. The second method involved approaching acquaintances of the secondary investigators and asking if they could refer any qualified informants. Potential informants were approached through email and social media.

Five participants, including three participants outside of Chattanooga, resulted from this method. Lastly, snowball recruiting, whereby participants recommended other participants, was used to garner two more participants.

In sum, thirteen informants were interviewed ($Median_{age} = 22$, $SD_{age} = 6.635$) with 92.3% having lived in the American South for over 10 years; 69.2% identified as White, 23.1% identified as Black, and 7.6% identified as Asian/Latino; 92.3% identified as men and 7.7% identified as non-binary; and 100% were maritally single. Table A describes the thirteen total informants interviewed.

Process

Once a time and place (if applicable) were set up, the primary investigator conducted depth interviews using a discussion guide (Appendix 1) which involved a series of questions ordered around a collection of 2D and video ads the investigators selected prior to the interview process. Ads were selected to include a variety of product categories, with varying levels of physical intimacy. The original intent was to conduct interviews until themes began to reveal themselves in the interpretive process; the first nine interviews included Ads 2-4, and 7, which were ordered to vary the physical intimacy and consumption scenarios, but interviews after the ninth included Ads 1 and 6 in order to delve into new themes discovered in the first nine interviews. The interview process concluded after the thirteenth interview when “empirical saturation” (Baker & Edwards, 2012) was reached, and a strong group of recurring themes emerged.

While developing the interview guide, the three investigators met regularly to discuss ways to elicit informants’ personal reactions to ads. The researchers developed a series of open-ended questions to probe into the underlying thoughts and feelings informants held.

During the interview, the informants were first asked for verbal consent to record the interview. After consenting, they were asked to recall any ads they'd seen before and describe them. The interviewer probed for product category, descriptions of the men, claims in the ad, branding, and emotional responses. The interviewer then asked a question central to the study: "How did this ad make you feel about yourself?"

After probing until the informants had nothing more to say, the interviewer showed the informant the first ad. The informants were asked to describe the ad and, if applicable, how seeing physical intimacy between two men in the ad made them feel. If informants said anything unclear or that could lead to further insights, they were asked, "What do you mean?" until they had nothing more to say. Informants were also asked how seeing the ad in a public space in the American South would make them feel, and lastly about their opinion on the brand. After repeating this process for each ad, the informants were asked to list their favorite and least favorite ads, which ad they related to the most, and if they had any other thoughts. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, each interview proceeded differently depending on the conversation, but the interview process guided each conversation.

Eleven of the interviews occurred over Zoom, while two took place in quiet public settings in Chattanooga. When presented with the choice most informants preferred virtual interviews over in-person.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the primary investigator recorded initial thoughts and notes on the informant's reactions and comments. Each interview was then transcribed by a third party and reviewed individually by each of the three investigators in depth, with additional notes taken and compared between the researchers. The investigators met regularly during the interview process

to discuss possible emergent themes. A systematic process for working with textual depth data was adopted (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997). An iterative interpretation process consisted of (1) cycling between interpreting meaning within the individual parts of each transcript and then (2) moving toward a more holistic view of all the transcripts. Identification and interviewing of respondents occurred over approximately six months, and the interpretive process spanned approximately four months. Interviewing concluded when no additional themes were revealed. The primary investigator analyzed all transcripts and collected every quote pertaining in any way to the five themes from each of the interviews; the secondary researchers then narrowed down the most relevant quotes from the assortment. The interpretive process resulted in the identification of four key themes which describe the reactions of gay men to male gay representation in advertising. These themes are presented next.

RESULTS

Four distinct themes emerged from the interviews, some holding complex subthemes: 1) positive emotion, rising self-esteem, and feelings of validation resulting from seeing gay men in advertising; 2) while viewed favorably, gay celebrity endorsers appear to be perceived through a lens of skepticism, ad weariness, and perceptions of datedness; 3) a desire for more gay diversity in advertising, specifically along the lines of ethnic diversity, LGBTQ+ diversity, body diversity, and lifestyle diversity; and 4) feelings of disenchantment and criticism for Pride Month ads. For the scope of this thesis, the theme of diversity and its subthemes will be examined.

Theme: Diversity

Nearly every informant had an awareness of an archetypal gay man, which some dubbed the “*elite*” gay (Marcus², Black, 25) or “*take back home to your parents*” gay (Shawn, White,

² All names are pseudonyms.

23), and an every day, “average Joe” gay (Craig, White, 39). The Elite gay is physically attractive with a muscular body, affluent with a hedonistic, trendy lifestyle, unmarried with no kids, and is almost always a gay, white man. The Everyday gays, or rather Everyday queer people, are those within the LGBTQ+ community who don’t check off every box that the Elite gay checks off. Marcus explicitly names and describes the Elite gay:

I don't know how to describe it, but it's those Instagram perfect gays. Not your bookstore gays, your gamer gays, or your chubby ones. I'm not chubby, but I could easily see where this is not representative at all. They're the ones that get TikTok famous. They're the ones that I guess everyone is going to look up to what gay should be. But it's like, no, this is about who I'm loving. I feel like this accessorizes gay men. In order to be a girl's bestie, you have to look like this, you have to be the cool gay. . . This reminds me of those kinds of gays that have to go to the rooftop bars and brunch in the morning. If you're in, you have to commit to wearing these clothes, driving these cars, showing up to these events, regularly.

Shawn furthers the idea of what he calls the “baseline gay” he most often sees represented in advertising:

What's interesting is when you usually see a gay man on these things, it's not every type of gay man. You usually see a lot of very clean cut, put together gay men, if you know what I mean.

Notably, “baseline” gays don’t check off all the extravagant boxes of the Elite gays, but they equally overshadow different lifestyles:

[They're] the kind of gay that you could bring . . . home to mom and dad. Like what would be universally accepted as being like, oh, that's gay, but that's not pushing limit...

Let's say there's the gays in a commercial that are walking around wearing their booty shorts and a crop top, I feel there would be a target demographic that would just be instantly turned away from that. So, they then just show a—not toned down, but—very moderate looking gay.

The Elite gays, or toned-down baseline gays, come in contrast to Everyday gays. When asked to describe what the Everyday gay looks like, Shawn offered this explanation; “*The everyday gay looks like just the average person. They could be dressed up in their pajamas or they could be dressed up in their sluttiest outfit. That's the range that I feel is missing in a lot of media.*”

Across the informants, different individuals expressed different desires or preferences when it came to representing lifestyles beyond the Elite gay. The common theme emerged simply as a desire for more diverse, unconventional, and underrepresented lifestyles in advertising. Shawn describes a desire to see different manners of dress (“*dressed up in their pajamas or they could be dressed up in their sluttiest outfit*”) and a more radically inclusive approach to showing different types of relationships, despite possible taboo:

I want them to start including a lot more diversity and not only the race of which these couples are portrayed, but also what kinds of gay couples there are. . . I'm waiting for the day that they have a gay couple and it's three people all holding their hands pushing a stroller down the street. Yeah, a “throuple.” But I think that would be awesome just to show that there's not one sort of relationship there, that gay representation can come in many ways, shapes and forms and it doesn't really have to follow any particular rule or standard to appeal to the general public eye.

William also mentioned a desire to see manners of dress which don’t conform to the typical gender roles of men’s and women’s apparel:

I wish it was more diverse and it came from people of all walks of life . . . not just plain-looking white men. . . I would say start off by putting in some gender nonconforming people that obviously have different expressive traits. Throw someone in there with some nail polish, and lipstick on, some makeup, throw a drag queen in there. We're not always this masculine. So, I would just want to see people from all walks of life.

While reiterating the same point, William mentioned another aspect of how representing the everyday gay man differs from representing the everyday straight man—what appears to be an important distinction when discussing diversity in lifestyle:

There's no representation other than what looks to be manly white men. I don't see any other advertising for gender nonconforming people. These people, the people that you've shown me, I would have considered as people that are publicly passing as straight. If they were not holding each other, these people could go out to the real world and walk around like nothing was wrong whereas if you wanted to put nail polish lipstick or anything that's a little bit out of the way on them, I would say it would make more people uncomfortable.

Other informants were wary of advertisements painting gay men in a campy, glitzy way:

The conservatives in my area, when they think of gays, they think of Target. And so because of that, it causes their perceptions of gay people to worsen, not improve. And so then I have to spend so much time trying to change their perception that I'm not wearing a rainbow tuxedo. I'm not wearing face glitter 24/7. (Marcus)

Though different individual informants made contradicting statements concerning which specific lifestyles they desired to see gay men represented living—for example, some expressing a desire to see more feminine men (William) while others expressing resentment of seeing overly

feminized men (Marcus)—the general consensus seemed to call for more variety in the way gay men’s lifestyles are represented. Gay consumers, like all consumers, live a multitude of different lifestyles, and desire to see gay men represented living a multitude of lifestyles. For example, instead of only showing gay men as trendy, hedonic, and affluent, the informants suggested complicating this representation by showing men in unorthodox relationships (a polyamorous relationship of three men), men wearing revealing, sexualized party clothing, men wearing conservative clothing, men dressing in gender nonconforming ways (wearing makeup, nail polish, etc.), underrepresented occupations (like drag queen performers), etc. To represent gay and queer men more accurately and holistically, informants expressed desire to see gay and queer men represented in ways which didn’t favor one manner as the default/stereotype over the other.

Ethnic Diversity

Opinions on a lack of ethnic diversity, white prevalence, and/or an outspoken desire for more ethnic diversity in advertising were present in every interview, notably from both white informants and informants of color. The common perception among all informants was that gay representation in advertising is almost completely limited to only showing white men; *“It’s just two white gay men. Like cool. I like it. But it’s really nothing special from the stuff that I’ve seen for years and years”* (Matt, White, 22), *“The ads that I have seen, they do particularly predominantly only showcase one particular race ... normally Caucasian couples”* (Deshaun, Black, 22), *“Once again, there’s no people of color. . . where are the people of color?”* (Leon, Black, 34). When asked “who is this ad for?” during the interview process, most informants said *“white gay men”* for most of the ads. However, informants of color had different responses regarding lack of diversity in ads than white informants did.

Responses from Informants of Color

First, informants of color touched on a theme of perceiving representation of their ethnicity as separate to representation of their sexuality. In other words, though the men in the ads were also same-sex attracted, the informants still felt a lack of representation because the ads showed men of different ethnicities than themselves—particularly, white men instead of men of color; *“I didn't feel like I was represented by the ad because it was two gay white men, which is not what I am . . . it didn't garner a personal deep reaction”* (David, Asian-Hispanic, 21).

Likewise, the informants seemed to show high levels of consciousness about the intersection between their ethnicity and sexuality, and how it related to the men represented in the ads, noting how inclusion of one facet of their identity can still leave another expressly unrepresented; *“Lots of times, queer representation is just white queer representation”* (David). In terms of representation in advertising, one informant argued that *“if [an organization's] message is to make people feel seen, [the organization has] to make everybody from all walks of life feel seen . . . not just [the Black] community, I want there to be representation for the Spanish community, Asian community, Indian community”* (Deshaun).

These informants all expressed a desire to see more intersectional representation in advertising. This sort of representation, or even just representation of non-white ethnicities, brought about positive emotions from informants of color in both ads they'd seen and ads they were asked to imagine. For example, David expressed feelings of positive self-esteem from seeing Tan France, identified as a person of color, in the ad for Alaska Airlines:

It's cool to see that representation and it's cool to see another man of color on such a big stage, I guess. So I guess I would say it makes me feel positively about myself, more

positively than negatively. Again, not jumping for joy, homophobia hasn't been solved for good or anything like that, but still positively.

While recalling ads with gay representation he'd previously seen, Leon recounted a real-estate agency ad which featured an interracial gay couple of white and black men:

It made me feel great because being a black male in a gay community who dates outside my race, you don't see that a lot in advertisement within the gay community, in my opinion. You see mostly typical stereotype muscular white guys. So seeing that made me feel really good.

Leon later imagined a hypothetical rendition of the Embassy Suites ad where one of the men in the photo was replaced with a man of color.

Seeing other gay people makes me excited, but if this ad here had a black and white man or two black guys, I will be up to here . . . excited. And I'm still excited by seeing this. Makes me feel great, but seeing a person of color in this ad with the hotel, I would just be giddy like a little schoolgirl.

Responses that rose from seeing other ethnicities represented in advertising didn't fully concentrate around positivity and self-esteem across the board for informants of color, however. Marcus (Black, 25) responded to the Levi's advertisement with confusion and criticism:

I don't understand what's going on with the black guy in the back. Again, almost just pushing this narrative. Okay, these [white] guys need to be in the front. You can be in the room, but again, you have to be light-skinned and your hair has to be conservative.

Deshaun made a similar comment about the Levi's ad:

This advertisement I feel is a step from the Campbell Soup commercial, we have a person of color in the advertisement. They are a step up. I will have to say I give them literally

points for including him, but they have him in the picture but he's in the distance. . . So I'm just conflicted with this. You get what I'm saying? I don't know what to take from it 'cause they have him in the far back.

Marcus' statements reflect another theme that emerged among the other informants of color, which pertained to feelings of inclusion and exclusion regarding representing ethnic diversity in gay advertising. In general, recalling gay men of color represented in advertisements resulted in feelings of inclusion among informants of color, whereas viewing and discussing ads which only represented white gay men (or white-washed people of color, as Marcus commented; *"you have to be light-skinned and your hair has to be conservative"*) resulted in feelings of exclusion.

These feelings of exclusion came hand in hand with the understanding that there exists a non-excluded group. For example, when the informants of color felt excluded, they attributed it to most ads targeting specifically white gay men as a default, prime demographic; when asked who the Target ad was targeting, Marcus responded, *"Again, it's white men. . . I guess that is the ideal image that we have created, right? So yeah, I guess I feel spoken to, but again, I don't feel represented."* While responding to the ad for Embassy Suites, Leon noticed the location of the hotel the ad was marketing and immediately recounted his perception of the town:

I know that's a really big, predominantly white, older, younger type city where the younger guys look for sugar daddies and older guys there. And it's very, very super gay friendly, but it's like those muscular daddies and those twinkies who are all white. . . Typical white daddies, and twinkies from Instagram and Twitter. I ran across a few gay pages where people have went there clubbing, taking pictures on the street and stuff like that. And it's all white people in those pictures, even from like pictures from the bars and clubs there, 90% of people are white. And I think this hotel is like, "Oh, hey, if you're

coming there, come stay with us. But it's a safe haven for white people. . . I'm not included.

When probed for his opinions on the lack of people of color in the Embassy Suites ad, Marcus responded with sentiments of exclusion:

Yeah, it says you are not enough, you are not accepted, you are not the ideal. You're okay, we're not going to come kill you anymore. That's great. But we don't actively think that you are valued that much. . . I'm looking at this and it just says, yeah, we want the rich, white gays to come through.

His sentiments carried over to other ads as well, including the Target ad:

I think that Target is very tropey, stereotyped, fit more towards the white twink narrative. And not everybody, again, fits that. And Target makes it seem like that's the only way to live.

In general, Marcus described his response to seeing gay representation in advertising as overwhelming negative because of the lack of ethnic representation:

[It makes me feel] negative all the time. And I think it's inversely negative. They hire the hunky Abercrombie models, traditionally white, beefy, abbed up. And so I get served ads for Pure for Men. . . I see their ads and it's these unattainable attractive male models. And so I feel like in most of these ads, I will never look like this. I feel like I need to have blonde hair and blue eyes, make six figures. You know what I mean? Take a shit ton of coke.

Marcus' statements further concretized the shared feeling that the lack of gay, ethnic diversity represented in advertising conveys white, gay men as the default. Deshaun also touched on the idea while responding to the family shown in the Marriot ad, suggesting that “a lot of it may not

even be intentional . . . it just comes from [consumers] being used to [white, gay men]. And so by default when they think of a family they automatically think of a non-POC family, because that's all we've ever seen in advertisement.”

The informants of color—and almost all informants in total—shared a common perception that ads operate as a vehicle for communicating inclusion or exclusion based on the ethnicities they represent, and that only representing white gay men communicates inclusion for white gay men and suggests that white gay men are the default or desired demographic, while the non-represented ethnicities are excluded and undesired.

Deshaun brought up a distinction which revolved around on the concept of being “*invited*” while describing the effect of representing gay men of color in advertisements; he first compared changes in advertising to changes in inclusion across other industries; “*[In the past] if we were to star in projects, we had to accept our awards backstage, weren't invited to certain spaces. So we have made a lot of [progress], yes we have. But now it is time to put that in advertisement and commercials.*” He then mentioned the distinction between majority white companies and Black-owned companies, and how—while it’s much more frequent to see diverse representation of ethnicity in Black-owned companies’ ads—seeing diverse representation in majority white companies elicits a unique response:

I feel like for people of color, we've had advertisements, but it was advertisements of Black-owned companies, like POC-owned companies and stuff, so seeing white companies include us, it makes you feel different, you know what I'm saying? . . . It makes us feel like okay, we feel more invited.

Furthermore, he offered some managerial implications for including more “inviting” advertising as well:

We pay attention to [representation]. And we see it, and . . . it makes us feel special, honestly, for real. So if you want your customer to feel special every time they buy your product, here's how you do it, make them feel invited.

Responses from White Informants

Whereas informants of color desired more diversity in ethnic representation in gay advertisements due in part to feelings of inclusion/exclusion and positive self-esteem from seeing diverse representation, white informants voiced an outspoken desire for ethnic diversity in advertising due to concepts of equality, white overrepresentation, and a desire to see others uplifted through advertisements as a vehicle of social change.

As stated *supra*, nearly every informant touched on the overrepresentation of white, gay men. As one informant shared with the primary investigator, *“You and me, we’re white, gay individuals. I think we see ourselves everywhere, and on almost every single ad that features pride month. Because most of it is really the stereotypical gay person: white, attractive, affluent”* (Matt, White, 22). This overrepresentation comes at the cost of neglecting other ethnic backgrounds in the LGBTQ+ community, which white informants shared an awareness of. William (White, 22) expressed that the overrepresentation of white gay men has resulted in the exclusion of men of color: *“For the most part too, the people that we see across media and on billboards are typically white, muscular individuals which doesn't really tell all of our community.”* White informants also noticed and touched on the sidelining of men of color in white-dominant ads; in response to the Levi’s ad, Craig (White, 39) pointed out the Black man in the back of the ad: *“So to me, it's still kind of like, white-dominant culture, in a sense. I just have to bring the politics out because . . . you have a Black guy and he's not front and center and they're not around him.”*

Nevertheless, white informants recognized importance in representing gay men of color in advertising. In response to the same Levi's ad, Lance (White, 37) felt that it is especially important to represent gay, Black men in advertising as a vehicle for social change:

On the different side of representation, I think it's also good that there's a male of color in this picture, because I think those intersections of identities are really important, especially in Black culture; even being public or anything in relation to being gay, being part of the LGBT community is . . . very much taboo and not something that there's a lot of support for. . . So I think they are potentially trying to reach that market as well, and showing that not only are we supporting gay males, but also potentially gay males of color, which is a total other market that does not get the attention or the marketing that could be out there.

As far as operating as a vehicle for social change, the informants explained that advertising—especially mass market—serves as a sort of litmus test for what the general public finds acceptable at a given time. Currently, white gay men find much more support than they did twenty or even ten years ago, and modern advertising evidences this; however, as social movements continue to evolve, the informants felt that advertising needs to keep pace. This specific phenomenon—of advertising operating as a vehicle for social change—functions as the praxis for informants' desires for diversity across all fronts (ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity, body, and consumption); however, Matt explains his understanding in regard to ethnic diversity in particular:

We have capitalized, we have marketed, and advertised the LGBTQ community in [such a way] that really, it's just one certain type of person that gets the most clout and gets the most normalization when it comes to advertisements that normal people see. And with

that, white, gay men can basically pass, and other people can't, because when people don't see those types of people, and different types of people other than what this ad [TARGET] is targeting, or showing, people don't understand it. And so they'll distance themselves from it. And with distance comes just a negative response to things that they don't fully understand or know about, [versus] stuff that they see on a regular basis.

When asked to respond to Alaska Airline's ad with Tan France, Matt expressed the same sentiments:

I mean, [overrepresenting white gay men] definitely puts the LGBTQ community in a box. And I think ads that still look like this are purposeful. They're made to do so. And also, I think it's just the lack of information and education that people have about the LGBTQ community, and I really do think that the reason why certain people are not uplifted as much as others in the LGBTQ community is because of these ads, and all these ads for decades have been catered for you to believe that this version of LGBTQ is the most acceptable, and it's the most normalized. And so people are going to be less mad about a gay white man than a gay person of color.

When asked how they'd respond to seeing men of other ethnicities represented in advertising, many white informants, such as Matt, voiced support or even preference over seeing more gay, white representation; *"I think it's more uplifting to see people that aren't like me being uplifted. . . Just because I know that I've gotten enough advertising about people that look like me and who are me, basically."*

Overall, nearly every informant felt that white gay men were overrepresented in advertising and explicitly expressed the desire to see ethnic representation for gay men that expanded beyond white.

LGBTQ+ Identity Diversity

Though in general the informants found LGBTQ+ representation in mass advertising rare, the majority of the representation they recalled only showed gay men, rendering other queer people nearly invisible. In line with his appreciation for seeing other ethnicities represented in advertising, Matt expressed an outspoken preference for seeing other members of the LGBTQ+ community than just gay men:

The type of ads that make me happier to see have, rather than just seeing the demographic of who I am, they have different types of people that are in the same community. A plethora of different people that are in the community. And it just shows that it is not just this demographic [gay men] that should be supported and uplifted, because the LGBTQ community is like, very segregated. It's very segmented into certain communities and sub communities. And sometimes it feels like these communities clash at the expense of unity. I'm seeing a lot of stuff about how a lot of like, gay people don't really like transgender people because they believe that we'll never be taken seriously on a broad scale if we include them into the conversation. And I think it's kind of sad to see that, because they're literally part of our same community. And so when I see different people that are like, you know, different from me, like sexuality and gender wise, it makes me happy because the LGBTQ community is not a bunch of white people, a bunch of white, gay, Tan France's.

Deshaun also expressed a desire to see representation for more than just gay men:

I loved the ad; I just feel like we should just get more renditions of the ad or more people creating ads like that... Different races that include different people. Also too, we should have more ads basically with people who are non-binary . . . we should get more

advertising with people who are like that, talking about their experience. I feel like being queer can be such a broad spectrum, it's something different to everybody. So I feel like because in the real world it's like this, also show that in the ads.

Informants empathized with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, and recounted their friends who fell into other queer categories:

Oh, if it was a trans person either from female to male or male to female, I would be hella excited too. Especially if it was a person of color trans person, because you don't see that a lot being represented in the world. . . Totally excited seeing that. You don't see that a whole lot. And I do have some trans friends. Just seeing that, represent them on advertisement, will make me feel good. (Leon)

Informants felt conscious of the wider LGBTQ+ community as a whole when considering gay representation in advertising, though not as explicitly as other facets of identity (ethnicity, body type, lifestyle, etc.). Many responses that arose regarding the community as a whole regarded its interconnected history (such as the Stonewall Riots) and the perception of “queerness” being a uniting force, which compelled a desire to see others like them (i.e., queer) “*lifted up*.” Again, informants found representation in advertising to be a vehicle of social change, or of “*lifting up*” underrepresented members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Body Diversity

When viewing ads, particularly those which make more hedonic appeals or feature younger, more conventionally attractive models, informants responded with consciousness of the models’ bodies and self-consciousness of their own. When asked who the Bud Light ad represented, Marcus answered, “*I don't think that I'm being represented. I don't think that different body types are loved. Why do women now have plus size models, but men don't? We*

don't care about mental health or body positivity for men." Jack (White, 27) explained his response to the Levi's ad and the way it made him feel:

It definitely makes me feel like I need to lose some weight to wear these jeans. So not great in that. . . I don't feel great about myself personally, no, because I feel like that is not what I look like. So I know if I put those jeans on, I feel like this is not the look that would actually be there. So I don't feel great about myself.

Conversely, when responding to the Embassy Suites ad, the focus on feet and away from upper bodies made him feel differently; *"It's just a weekend getaway. It's not showing a specific body type. It's literally legs. I'm not thinking about what I should look like."* Although he responded positively to seeing current gay representation in advertising, Leon still expressed a desire to see chubbier models featured in gay advertisements:

Only thing I wish you'd see more is the bigger people, more of the huskier guys, bear guys, chubby guys versus your typical white, in-shape. Whether they're black or white, just to see more body types of guys in those type of advertisements. If that was the case, I would feel really, really good.

William noted that though he seemed to check off the boxes for relating to the ad for Levi's jeans, he still disliked the ad because of the difference between his body and the bodies of the models; *"I don't like this ad, it just wouldn't do anything for me at all. Although I am white, I don't necessarily look like the people in this image here. . . good body, muscular, clean cut."*

Comments on body diversity weren't limited only to criticism or negative emotions, however. Charlie (White, 19) didn't perceive the models in the Levi's ad as Elite gays, but rather as more masculine; though he didn't relate to their bodies, he appreciated the ad for showing different types of ways gay men's bodies can look:

I don't look like them and I'm not like that body type yet or whatever, so I guess it's just nice that they're representing people that wouldn't typically be in a queer ad, but then also it's not quite my type of body or representation. . . It makes me feel happy that, like I said, it shows that you don't have to be feminine or act a certain way and that you can still enjoy all the straight things or be more straight presenting I guess . . . and still be gay technically.

Consumption Diversity

Another major facet of representing gay and queer men living diverse lifestyles involves product category and consumption contexts—particularly, showing gay men participating in “non-gay matters” or stereotypically “non-gay” consumption situations. In other words, this involves ads that include gay men acting in situations that, besides from including gay men, would otherwise be unrelated to gay representation. Historically, ads that include gay representation typically stay within hedonic industries (fashion, beauty, alcohol, etc.) or concern sexual health. Overtime these consumption contexts have become conflated with “gay matters,” mirroring common social stereotypes which are mirrored by the “Elite” gay stereotype. An ad that operates out of these consumption situations might illustrate, for example, a real estate agent showing a house to a gay couple, or a gay couple and their children traveling with an airline on family vacation. Or, in other words, one could understand ads that feature non-gay consumption to mean any sort of consumption which historically has not included gay representation.

The predominant product category informants recalled seeing gay representation in was sexual health awareness—particularly for the brand Descovy for PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), a medication which lowers the chances of getting HIV through sex:

Typically, the only time I ever see gay men in any sort of advertising is honestly for billboards for like STD awareness. I mean, I'm all for the education, but for the most part, people tend to sexualize us a lot and that's all they can associate us with, so.

(William)

Informants expressed negative or complicated responses to seeing these advertisements, usually regarding the perception that the predominance of ads for PrEP perpetuate the stereotype of gay men being hypersexual, as William mentioned. Jack seconded the negative responses this arises:

I literally just saw one yesterday, but it's sad, it's like the only things I can ever think of are for medications. There was something for if you have HIV. The one I saw last night was talking about how it had two medications in it instead of four, I don't know, or DESCOVY. I feel like I never really see them other than that.

One form of representation the informants appreciated that moved beyond STD awareness campaigns was inserting gay men into ads that showed situations or product categories beyond what gay men are typically shown in or using the same context that typically features heterosexual consumers but instead with homosexual consumers. For example, David responded positively to the Bud Light ad for including gay men while incorporating contexts usually used with heterosexual Bud Light consumers:

My God, this ad is gorgeous. I don't even know what to say. It uses all the text fonts and the visual cues of a straight beer ad. The literal only difference is what those elements are being used to convey. I love that it is exactly the same as any beer ad and it just happens to be two men and it just says, "You know what you like," that's gorgeous.

Marcus appreciated the Bud Light ad for placing the product first, and the gay men second:

It's so refreshing. Sex isn't the forefront of the ad. It is about the product. You know you like Bud Light and then just the people in there. I wish those guys were doing the hug thing with a beer in their hands, because then it would be like, "Hey, we drink Bud Light."

Though moving sex out of the forefront was a common appreciation among the informants, Carl (White, 25) appreciated the way the Bud Light ad used sexual appeals, which he explored while imagining his response to seeing the ad on a public display in the American South:

I would feel pretty positive about it, maybe because I feel like there's so many ads out there that have the same appeal to straight relationships... if we're going to say everyone has sex, at least just say it. You know what I mean? Of course, people do it. . . if my mom saw it or close friends of mine that didn't understand that community very well saw it, it's like, "Oh yeah. That's kind of what it looks like. I've been in that situation many times and if you're curious what it feels like or what it looks like, that's actually good representation of what it looks like."

He continued:

There's not really much ambiguity or it's not really on that G-rated like, oh, love is love and everything is great. It's not rainbow and sunshine. It's almost digging into the more intimate reality of what gay relationships look like.

In general, there seems to be a conflicting relationship between marriage/family-oriented appeals and sex appeals in the informants' responses. Carl appreciated seeing gay sex appeals in advertising because of the way it presents gay sexuality in equal terms with heterosexual sexuality, since heterosexual sex appeals have long been used in advertisements. Lance, on the other hand, criticized the Embassy Suites ad because of its use of gay sex appeal:

I think it's just one of those things of the representation I guess is cool, but why are we doing it this way, that sets up a stereotype that being gay is just about sex, which is what I see here.

Matthew also commented on the ad for Embassy Suites in a similar way:

The ad is also pretty suggestive. Which means like, I don't know, there's such a big notion in the LGBT community that gay people are like, way more erotic, which I guess in some settings, it could be true. But also, it's a stereotype that is not always correct.

Many informants were aware of the stereotype of gay men as hypersexual, both while looking at sexual ads, like the Embassy Suites ad, and while discussing gay representation in media as a whole:

I just feel like there should be more forms and more people put out into the media and not just us not being sexualized people. Most straight couples, heterosexual couples, automatically think of us as these sexual deprived people, and that's all they can associate us with. (William)

In opposition to ads which feature sex appeal, many informants appreciated ads with marriage and family themes. Shawn picked an ad with family themes as his favorite from the mix:

I'd say my favorite one was probably the Campbell's. . . I really thought it was cute. It referenced pop culture and it showed just a very cute family doing a very cute thing. I feel that one resonated with me the most for some reason. Yeah, I just really liked how it was. It was simple, wasn't too much. . . I thought it was very wholesome and family centric."

Other informants also appreciated and resonated with the Campbell's ad for not only its family and marriage themes, but also its culmination of other aspects of representation the informants seemed to desire, such as representing gay men in the same contexts as heterosexual consumers:

I love that advertisement. I thought that it was very cute, it shows... It's just basically like any other advertisement, any other Campbell's commercial that shows a family just participating in day-to-day morning activities. But instead, it is showing a family where the kid has two dads. I feel like people like to make it feel as if like, oh that kid has two dads, so that family isn't quote, unquote normal. When at the end of the day we're just like any other family, except queer. A family with two dads, so I loved that it showed that, hey we eat dinner with our kids. We both play around with our kids, and I just thought it was very wholesome, I love that advertisement. (Deshaun)

Many informants resonated with marriage and family ads, and even expressed feelings of aspiration rising from seeing the ads; for example, Jack had this to say about the Campbell's ad: *"It definitely was really sweet to see a family that represents the kind of family that I guess I will have one day,"* and Lance had this to say: *"seeing it in a commercial, I think it's great to just see normal, everyday people living a life that you want to see yourself living someday."*

Jack criticized the ad for the context in which it represented gay men, however. In the ad, a man tells a child, "Luke, I am your father" in reference to the iconic Star Wars quote. Immediately after, another man says, "No, I am your father," and the camera pans out to show another man sitting at the table, revealing the men as a gay couple and their son. Jack felt that, even though it seemed to represent a gay couple in the same context as a straight couple, the ad ultimately still used different contexts and cues, which made the representation feel different than straight representation:

It's kind of funny, because it's like it's not just one of those things where they're like, "This is normal to see a gay couple." It has to be a reveal, because it's something shocking or

something you're not normally going to see. So, it's still like it should just be a gay family in there, and it doesn't need to be some huge reveal.

Many informants expressed a desire to be represented in the same way as straight relationships, such as Shawn, who had this to say about the Campbell's ad: *"It also made me just feel good too seeing just a very normal happy couple doing a very normal, happy couple thing that heterosexual relationship would also display."* Shawn connected this representation to his concept of the Everyday gay: *"They seem just very normal. Very normal, very friendly gay people, loving, clearly, they have a child that they both care for. I don't know. That seems pretty everyday human kind of gay."*

The informants were very aware of social progress surrounding gay acceptance and gay marriage rights while responding to ads which featured marriage themes. Deshaun found ads that featured gay marriage to be affirming:

I love every time we see queer people get married to each other because it's something for the longest time that was illegal . . . I love that it's like on an advertisement. Most advertisements, we get heterosexual couple who just got married. So I love the fact that this time we have a queer couple. We get married too, we're still human at the end of the day.

Lance also recalled his firsthand perception of the social change:

At first, it was just very affluent [guys], and it left it open to interpretation if they were a couple or not. But I think in the past year or so, maybe three years, you actually can tell they are a family. They are now having children in commercials and in magazines, et cetera. So I think that's been the shift of, "Oh, they're now just real people who have normal lives like you, it just happens to be two men or men just living their lives like

anyone else." So I think that's been the trend and the transition that I've witnessed, and it's really portraying them as just normal, everyday human beings living their lives, which is nice to see because it's true. That's reality.

Shawn brought together his recollection of social change and feelings of affirmation:

It's not weird, it's just still so new in our generation and hopefully going to continue for many years to come. But we spent at least probably 14 years of our life watching TV and seeing ads in commercials that did not display any of that. So now when I see stuff like that, ads that just have people doing regular gay stuff, it always comes up almost as a little shock for me. And it always catches my attention though just because it's like, "Hey, that's something new, that's not just the white couple going to get their mail outside. That's a gay couple getting their mail." I don't know. It definitely comes across as a shock, but then it makes me happy, just being able to see. I don't know. It's not like we have to prove anything, but I feel the gay community has struggled so much and to prove that they are normal or they're just like heterosexual couples, but different. But it's a very nice thing to see, the inclusivity of it all.

Overall, the informants tended to resonate deeply with gay marriage and family themes in ads and found them to inspire positive feelings and aspiration.

Discussion

All subthemes regarding diversity in gay representation in advertising point to a singular stereotype of gay men that oversaturates the current scope of representation: the Elite gay man, who meets the following qualifications: he is wealthy, trendy, physically fit or thin, white, gay, cisgender, and a man. Across the board, the informants desired to see this stereotype deconstructed, with a preference for ads which change the qualifications. Instead of the Elite gay,

informants desire to see gay representation which moves beyond: examples include poor, married, plus sized, and gay men of color. Even more, the informants desired to see demographics represented beyond their own (gay men), such as transgender people, women, etc.

This desire to see other demographics represented bases itself upon the understandings of ads as vehicles of social change, or at the very least litmus tests for what is socially acceptable to the general public, and of their identities as gay men placing them within the larger LGBTQ+ community. For example, though they already received the majority of representation, white informants appreciated (or even preferred) to see gay men of color represented in advertisements by virtue that this representation would mark progress in racial justice and that these men were fellow members of the LGBTQ+ community. All informants seemed to share a sense of comradery with the larger LGBTQ+ community as a whole and understood that this community encompassed people of diverse shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and lives.

The informants also desired to see diverse forms of representation because a diversity of representation is more capable of representing each informant than simply showcasing the Elite gay, and the closer the informants found themselves approximated in an ad (such as Leon describing his emotions when seeing older, husky black men dating outside of their race, which he personally related to), the greater the feelings of elation, affirmation, and self-esteem the informants felt.

Limitations

A few limitations hindered the research process, which future studies may pay attention to circumnavigating. Due to the sensitive nature and length of interviews, recruiting informants outside of the investigators' circles of acquaintances was difficult, which may have led to a skewed sample of informants where the majority are associated with academia and the majority

are white. The researchers attempted to find informants from the community at large by posting flyers at community centers, such as coffee shops and gay bars, with little success; different strategies might draw in more nonacademic and racially diverse informants, who may develop new insights.

Additionally, this study focused on a single geographic region within one country (the American Southeast, particularly around the Chattanooga-Atlanta area). It would be important to examine the degree to which the findings of this study generalize outside of this region.

Managerial Implications

According to Gallup, Inc (Jones, 2022), 1-in-5 Gen Z adults and 1-in-10 Millennials identified as LGBTQ+ in 2022. As younger generations come of age, their purchasing power will raise; for example, the oldest members of Generation Z are already reaching adulthood at 18-25 years old. Gallup states that, “the proportion of all Americans who identify as LGBT can be expected to grow in the future as younger generations will constitute a larger share of the total U.S. adult population” (2022). With the proportion of consumers who identify as LGBT rising rapidly as more social change sparks greater feelings of acceptance, it falls into the best interest of brands across various industries (niche and mass market) to actively include LGBTQ+ consumers in their marketing strategies. Marketing managers whose strategies involve making their consumers feel positive emotions through branding and advertising may find it beneficial to include a larger breadth of diversity in their advertising campaigns. As Deshaun put it clearly:

We pay attention to [representation]. And we see it, and . . . it makes us feel special, honestly, for real. So if you want your customer to feel special every time they buy your product, here's how you do it, make them feel invited.

To make the LGBT market feel invited more effectively by ad campaigns, marketers should evolve beyond representing only the “Elite” gay man. All informants from diverse ethnicities—including white informants—expressed an explicit desire or preference to seeing more ethnic diversity in gay representation in advertising. Though the American population is still a majority white, marketing managers may find that including gay men of color will increase the relatability, resonance, and effectiveness of their ad campaigns to consumers of diverse ethnicities. This especially resonates with consumers who see advertisements as a vehicle for social change and feel that ads need to “catch up” to social changes.

Not only do gay men favor ads which move beyond the Elite; they also show high levels of resentment of the Elite gay stereotype and may even find ads which employ the Elite gay alienating. Ads that more effectively resonate with gay men include diverse representations of different types of people—feminine, masculine, rich, poor—for products of all sorts of product categories and consumption situations—not just niche products, like sexual health awareness medications. Mass market ads that show a diverse plethora of gay men in non-gay consumption contexts may find particular benefits from including gay men in their advertisements, as the informants had especially positive reactions to seeing this form of representation.

It should be noted, however, that in line with previous research, marketing managers should exercise caution when including LGBTQ+ representation, especially if their target market includes a large percentage of socially conservative consumers who reject LGBTQ+ identities. In light of the recent Bud Lite and Dylan Mulvaney controversy (Floyd & Selk, 2023), companies should ensure that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals will not alienate a large portion of their target market; and more importantly, if alienating a portion of their target market is inevitable, that the company is strategically prepared for possible consumer backlash.

Opportunities for Future Research

Additional phenomena emerged in the interviews but lacked the breadth and complexity to establish themselves as major themes. Younger informants (aged 19-22 in this cohort of informants) seemed to express a desire for more radical and diverse representation than older (aged 25-39 in this cohort). This boundary approximates the divide between generations Z and Y. For example, Shawn (22) desired to see unorthodox gay relationships (such as three-person polyamorous “throuples”) and men in more sexual, “slutty” clothing while Jack (27) criticized advertising for oversexualizing gay men. Matthew (22) desired to see men in gender nonconforming make-up, while Marcus (25) expressed concern that this form of representation would create a stereotype of gay men wearing “face glitter 24/7.”

Matthew even explicitly stated that representation of gay men gave him no emotional responses at all compared to representation of other, less represented groups in the LGBTQ+ community:

I don't really think much about it. It's two guys--so what? You know? That's just how I feel. I feel indifferent about a lot of it. And it's just like, it's not a conversation that should really have very much weight, you know, just because it's just something normal. You know, I read something about how 47% of Gen Z identify as some sort of some form of LGBTQ.

David (21) shared the idea that marriage themes, which older informants deeply resonated with, underrepresented queer relationships.

Additionally, though many informants tended to resent Pride Month ads and perceived them as exploitative, younger informants expressed an overwhelming wariness, distrust, and resentment for advertising and corporations, which David described in detail:

The emotions I feel whenever I see a queer ad are very complicated because they're measured by the fact that advertising is something that exists within a capitalist system to make you more miserable. So, I'm not sure really how to feel whenever I see queer representation advertising anyways, because it's seeing positive representation in a format in media that I think is inherently bad in itself.

Based on the findings of this study, researchers should reconsider the lens through which younger cohorts of gay men perceive gay representation in advertising. Unlike older gay men, the new generations are hypercritical of advertising, but share the overall desire to see more diversity and inclusion in marketing practices.

Future research may shed insight into how Generation Z, which is starting to mature into the marketplace, specifically feels about radical vs. normalized LGBTQ+ representation. Other areas of interest include Generation Z's wariness of corporations and rejection of marketing activities, and the deeper, underlying facets and motivations of gay men's rejection of Pride Month advertising.

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TABLE A – Informant Profiles

INFORMANT	AGE	ETHNICITY	LIVED IN SOUTH	OCCUPATION	ORIENTATION	Gender	MARITAL STATUS
Matthew	21	White	10+ years	Marketing Assistant, Server, Student	Gay	Man	Single
David	21	Asian-Hispanic	6-10 years	Barista, Student	Queer	Non-binary	Single
Craig	39	White	10+ years	Finance/CCO	Gay	Man	Single
Marcus	25	Black	10+ years	Real Estate Agent	Gay	Man	Single
Carl	25	White	10+ years	Senior Marketing Operations Analyst	Gay	Man	Single
William	22	White	10+ years	Real Estate Agent	Gay	Man	Single
Leon	34	Black	10+ years	Project Coordinator	Gay	Man	Single
Lance	37	White	10+ years	Higher Education Professional	Gay	Man	Single
Charlie	19	White	10+ years	Retail Associate, Student	Gay	Man	Single
Jack	27	White	10+ years	Communications Manager, Nonprofit	Gay	Man	Single
Brian	21	White	10+ years	Insurance Claims, Student	Gay	Man	Single
Shawn	22	White	10+ years	Nanny, Door Dasher, Student	Gay	Man	Single
Deshaun	22	Black	10+ Years	Receptionist	Gay	Man	Single

APPENDIX 1 – Discussion Guide

DEPTH INTERVIEW OUTLINE AND QUESTIONS

Qualifying Questions (asked before arranging interview):

- a. Do you identify as a same-sex attracted man/male-leaning person? (Inclusive of gay/queer men and nonbinary people).
- b. Do you recall seeing gay men represented in advertising at any point?

If informant responds “no”, the informant will be placed at the end of the informant interview list and behind those who respond “yes” in list of interview priority; our aim is to interview informants who have seen ads already, but if that restricts our numbers too much, we will expand our informant group to those who have not.

Informed Consent

1. Greeting, informed consent, and thank you.

Thank you for meeting with me today.

[Present and review Informed Consent document. Obtain informant informed consent orally and in writing.]

Two individuals will receive a \$150 gift card. Anyone can enter the drawing for a chance to win one of two \$150 gift cards and do not have to participate in the research study to enter the drawing. The odds of winning are approximately 2 in 20 but may vary depending on how many people choose to enter the drawing without completing the study. The winners will be identified, and the incentive awarded upon completion of all the interviews.

2. Build brief rapport—offer an encouragement for free-flowing thought.

While answering, please don't worry about formulating your thoughts in any refined or structured way. Try to speak your thoughts as they come to you in stream-of-consciousness, even if they seem jumbled. There are no right or wrong answers – only your honest opinions and thoughts matter.

3. Offer complementary summary of research results once research is complete.

4. Answer any participant questions or concerns before beginning.

Interview Questions:

1. *Please take a moment to recall any advertising with portrayals of gay men that you may have seen.*

Based on your recollection, how often would you say you've seen portrayals of gay men in advertising?

Where/how did you see these portrayals?

2. *With these recollections in mind, would you describe, in depth, an ad that you recall that portrays gay men (or men who might be gay)? What do you recall about the ad?*

- Probe for product category,
- Probe for brand in the ad,
- Probe for description or the visuals in that ad,
 - implicit / explicit appeal – in depth.
 - “How did you know the characters in the ad were gay?”
 - Probe for reactions of physical intimacy; sexual themes
 - Probe for reactions of illustrations of “slice of gay life” ads
- Probe for claims in the ad
- *How did this ad make you feel? What was your reaction to this ad?* Probe for possible themes.
 - Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

- If ad represents an implicit appeal, probe for interpretation and reaction. Be sure to probe for where ad was seen if respondent recalls.
 - (This addresses recommended practice of gay window advertising – using implicit gay appeals in mainstream advertising to avoid negative reactions of heterosexuals but still communicate with gay consumers).
- If ad represents an explicit appeal, probe for interpretation and reaction.
 - (*How does seeing physical intimacy in an ad make you feel?*)
- *How did this ad make you feel about yourself?*
- *What do you think about the brand in this ad?*
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*
- Ask about another ad or brand marketing strategy that features a gay man or men and go through this process until informant describes all ads/recalled ads in depth and their reaction.

Show Informants Ad Examples:

I am now going to show you a series of ads and ask you questions about your responses to these ads. There are no right or wrong answers, only your honest and transparent impressions matter.

Ad One: Campbell's Soup Ad: <https://cdn.jwplayer.com/previews/dVKC0nuo>

Campbell's Soup (explicit; consumer product; marriage theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with "what do you mean?")

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with "what do you mean?")
 - Does this ad resonate with your daily life?
 - Probe for reactions of illustration of "slice of gay life"
 - Probe for reactions to gay marriage theme

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with "what do you mean?")
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Ad Two: Levi's (implicit; fashion, sex theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - How do you feel about how these men are portrayed?
 - Probe for reactions to illustration of the men in this ad

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Ad Three: Alaska Air (implicit; travel, love theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for reaction to use of celebrity endorser.

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***

How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?

.

Ad Four: Target (explicit; consumer product, marriage theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Does this image relate to your daily life? How – explain?
 - Probe for reactions of illustration of “slice of gay life”
 - Probe for reactions to gay marriage theme

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Ad Five: Embassy Suites (explicit; travel, sex theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for reactions to physical intimacy and sex theme.

How does seeing physical intimacy between two men in an ad make you feel?

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Ad Six: Marriot (explicit; travel; marriage theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Does this represent your life? How—explain
 - Probe for reactions of illustration of “slice of gay life”
 - Probe for reactions to gay family / marriage theme

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Ad Seven: Bud Light (explicit; consumer product, sex theme)

1. ***Please take a moment and review this ad. Now, please describe this ad to me.*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)

2. ***What is your reaction to this ad?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for description of gay men in ad.
 - Probe for reactions to suggestiveness in the ad.

3. ***How does this ad make you feel?*** (If necessary, follow up with “what do you mean?”)
 - Probe for possible Positive affect:
 - self-esteem, validation, reduced social stigma, feeling more accepted, pride, inspiration, feelings of comfort, self-relation, aspiration, sexual stimulation.
 - Negative affect:
 - feelings of discomfort, feeling of exploitation

4. ***Who do you think is represented by this ad? Who is this ad for?***

5. ***What do you think of the brand of this ad?***
 - *How did this ad impact your desire for the brand/purchase?*

Wrap Up

1a. Of those ads that we've talked about, which ad is your favorite? Why? Least favorite? Why?

1b. How would you feel if you saw this ad on a poster in a store or on the street here in town? For example, on a bus stop or in a display at the mall.

2. Which ads did you relate to most? Which ads did you relate to least?

3. In general, do ads that include gay themes influence your thoughts/feelings about these brands?

4. Compare what you think/how you feel when you saw these ads to ads you've seen without gay themes.

5. As you're considering gay representation in advertising, are there other thoughts you would like to share?

Allow informant to add comments, discuss ideas, ask additional questions, etc. Thank the informant and confirm any information and desire for results summary.

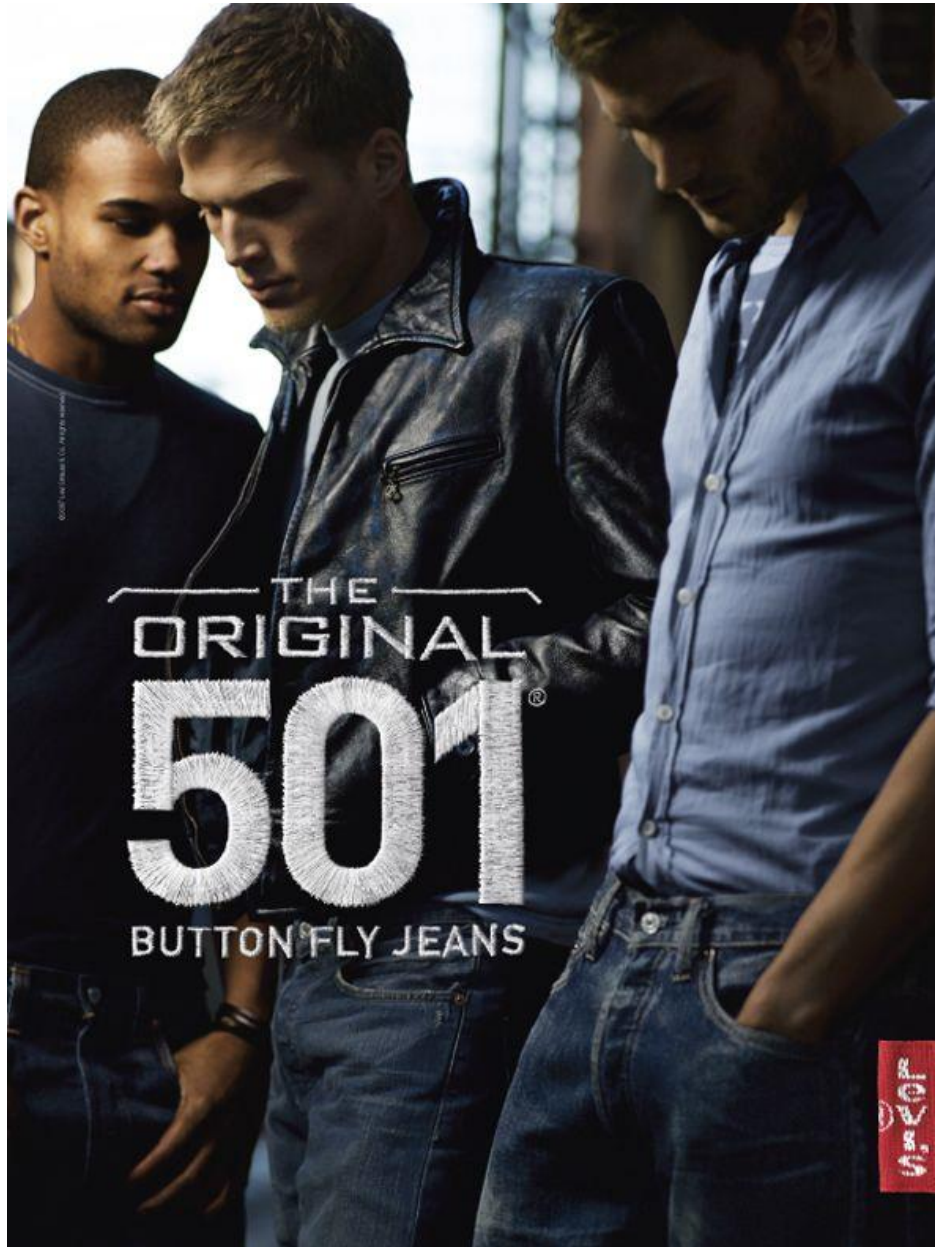
Finally, for classification purposes, please tell us your age, ethnicity, gender, occupation, and marital status.

Informant Number: _____

1. Age: What is your age? _____
2. Ethnicity: Please select any of the following that are applicable.
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Hispanic / Latino
 - d. Black or African American
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White
 - g. Prefer not to respond.
3. How long have you lived in the southern region of the United States?
 - a. Less than 2 years
 - b. 2-5 years
 - c. 6-10 year
 - d. Greater than 10 years.
4. Where do you live now?
5. Please identify your occupation (if a student, state "student") and note area of part time work. _____

APPENDIX 2 – Advertisements

Campbell's Soup Ad: <https://cdn.jwplayer.com/previews/dVKC0nuo>





THE LOOK GOOD ANYWHERE SALE

FARES FROM **\$49*** ONE WAY

*Restrictions apply

A Target advertisement featuring two men in suits embracing and kissing. The background is white with falling confetti. The Target bullseye logo is in the top left, and the word "ADVERTISEMENT" is in the top right. The slogan "that's love™" is in the top left. The main headline "BE YOURSELF, TOGETHER." is in large red letters. Below it, the text "Build a Target® Wedding Gift Registry as unique as the two of you." is in black. At the bottom, a red button with white text says "explore our catalog".

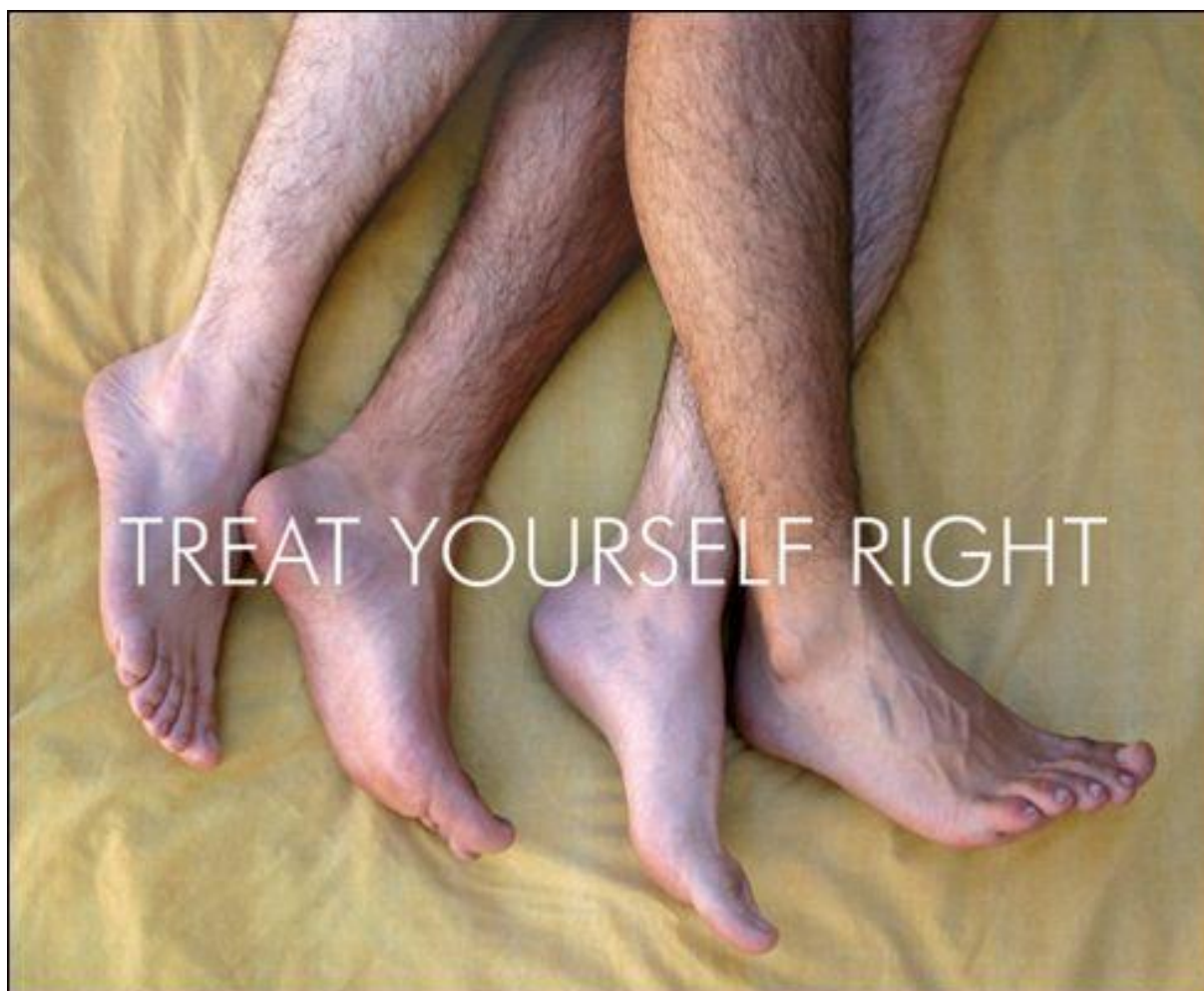
ADVERTISEMENT

that's love™

**BE YOURSELF,
TOGETHER.**

Build a Target® Wedding Gift Registry
as unique as the two of you.

explore our catalog



With ALL SUITE NIGHT Stays
Complimentary
Cooked-to-Order Breakfast &
Nightly Manager's Reception
5 minutes to AIA/Sebastian St. Beach
5 miles to Wilton Manors



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MARRIOTT

GAYLORD
HOTELS

COURTYARD

Residence
INN

SPRINGHILL
SUITES

FAIRFIELD
INN & SUITES

TownePlace
SUITES

**YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU LIKE.**

Grab your friends and grab the just-right taste you've always loved. Easy to drink, never too heavy and never too light that's drinkability. Keep the good times going with refreshingly smooth Bud Light.

THE DIFFERENCE IS DRINKABILITY.

**BUD
LIGHT**

4.2% ALC/VOL (8.4 PROOF)
BOTTLED AT 50°F (10°C)
BUD LIGHT BEER

© 2004 Anheuser-Busch, Inc. All rights reserved. Bud Light is a registered trademark of Anheuser-Busch, Inc. Bud Light is not a food or drug. Drink Responsibly.

The advertisement features a large, condensation-covered Bud Light bottle on the right side, with a splash of beer at the bottom. In the background, two men are smiling and embracing each other. The scene is set against a dark blue background with a large, curved, metallic structure, possibly a tunnel or a large pipe, with water droplets visible on its surface.

APPENDIX 3 – Communications Used

WIN \$150!

If you're a self-identifying GAY or QUEER MAN, participate in our research project for a chance to win \$150!



We're a student-led research team conducting in-depth interviews with gay students and their peers in Chattanooga about how you feel about the way gay men are represented in advertising.

For more information on how to get involved, email Lucas Thompson at **lnp837@mocs.utc.edu** or Dr. Alycia Franklin at **Alycia-Frankline@utc.edu**

Participation not required to enter survey.
Odds to win: around a 10% chance.
This research has been reviewed and approved by the UTC IRB board, email: irb@utc.edu
IRB Protocol Number: 22-033

An illustration of two men standing and hugging. The man on the left is wearing a dark blue sweater and brown pants. The man on the right is wearing a light blue sweater and dark pants. They are both smiling. The background is a stylized landscape with green hills and an orange sky.

WIN \$150!

If you're a self-identifying gay or queer man, participate in our research project for a chance to win \$150!