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Going all the way? LGBTQ people's receptiveness to gay-themed advertising in a Belgian context

Introduction

Since the 1990s, sexual minorities or LGBTQ people have become a considerable consumer segment in western societies. Consequently, gay-themed adverts are no longer the preserve of gay niche media but now also appear in mainstream media with 'gay' imagery and messages ranging from covert and implicit to overt and explicit (Sender, 2004). Though many studies have focussed on the effectiveness of gay-themed advertising among LGBTQ audiences, the majority have been conducted in the USA with its unique history of promotional culture and LGBTQ activism (e.g., Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2004, 2005; Tsai 2010, 2012). Furthermore, the existing literature has offered inconsistent and sometimes even conflicting implications for advertising and marketing practices (e.g., Dotson *et al.*, 2009; Hooten *et al.*, 2009; Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull *et al.*, 2008; Puntoni *et al.*, 2011). This suggests that an essentialist view of LGBTQ identities, a homogenised conception of the 'global gay' (Dhoest *et al.*, 2017) and the resulting one-size-fits-all approach to LGBTQ advertising is ineffective. This is in part due to the fact that consumers from minority groups are particularly attuned to the historically and culturally specific context that frames their day-to-day lives and in which they are faced with the unfinished process of social acceptance (Wasshede, 2021). Building on these observations, we concur with the argument that context-sensitivity should serve as a starting point when studying responses to gay-themed advertising (Eisend and Hermann, 2019). Given our premise that context is vital in determining how LGBTQ people make sense of gay-themed advertising, the purpose of this article is to empirically explore how gay-themed advertising strategies are evaluated in relation to context.

In this article, we focus specifically on the context of Belgium. Known as a country where the polarization of politics and public opinion regarding LGBTQ rights is less marked than in other western countries, such as the USA, and that has played a pioneering role in LGBTQ rights (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; ILGA Europe, 2021), Belgium constitutes an interesting setting to explore how different types of gay-themed advertising strategies are received among LGBTQ consumers. In this study, we shine a spotlight on young LGBTQ adults who grew up in a climate of growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people with increased media visibility and political and legal action in favour of sexual minorities. Indeed, mainstreaming and normalisation have become the key categories in how Belgian society and politics think and speak about LGBTQ people. At the same time, Belgium faces a resurgence of anti-minority sentiments both in politics and society, also among the younger generations, which manifest themselves in increased hostility against differentness (Dierckx *et al.*, 2017).

Against the background of this dialectic tension, we are interested in the social character of gay-themed advertising reception among LGBTQ consumers, in not only asking what these advertising messages mean to this group, but also how it comes to mean this. This is a question that leads us to contextual consideration of the specific social resources LGBTQ people rely on to express their ideas about gay-themed advertising. It also begs the question how their responses to gay-themed advertising are anchored in their lived realities, situational contexts of everyday life as well as in wider social contexts. Throughout this paper, the widespread and inclusive term LGBTQ will be used to refer to the sexual minorities involved in this study, i.e., lesbian, gay and bisexual

people. The guiding research questions are as follows: (1) What types of social knowledge and experience do LGBTQ people rely on when evaluating different gay-themed adverts? And (2) how does this (hypothetically) affect their receptiveness to gay-themed adverts? To answer our two research questions we turn to the theoretical fields of media reception studies and LGBTQ studies. Media reception studies insists on the formative role of situational and social contexts in sense-making processes and argues that the ways in which people engage with media messages and advertising in particular is always anchored in social knowledge and experience (Bullo, 2014; Schrøder, 1997; Schrøder, 2000). The field of LGBTQ studies departs from LGBTQ people's minority status in society and investigates popular culture and everyday life as a ground on which positive social change can be achieved (Hall, 2017).

Despite the growing body of research on LGBTQ consumers, there is a significant lack of contextualised studies focusing on this population's engagement with different gay-themed adverts and the ways in which perceived meaning interacts with lived experience and context (Eisend and Hermann, 2019). This study seeks to obtain data which can help to address these research gaps. It also constitutes an essential area of research for those looking to ascertain the effectiveness and sense-making of adverts from the perspective of the consumers they target (Bullo, 2014). Particularly when it comes to the LGBTQ-advertising nexus, the focus has often been on production, texts and supply, as opposed to reception, sense-making and engagement (Tsai, 2010, 2012). Lastly, the study shows that the moment of advertising reception marks one of the processes by which minority groups carefully express their need to belong to mainstream society but also their want to be recognized in their differentness. In this way, the study also meets the demand for more consideration of an ethics of representation in marketing (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005), especially given advertising's social role in enhancing progressive inclusion (McDonald *et al.*, 2021).

The article is organised as follows: The first section situates the empirical study in the body of literature concerning gay-themed advertising strategies and the considerably smaller selection of qualitative research studies on LGBTQ people's responses to this type of advertising. The second section sets out the contextual dimension of the research, with a particular focus on Belgian society while the third outlines the methodology. Next, the fourth section discusses the interview responses, focusing on the contingent relationship between the evaluation of gay-themed advertising and social knowledge and experience, followed by a brief discussion of our findings. Finally, the fifth section acknowledges the implications of our research for marketing strategies and suggests areas for further research.

Theoretical background

From implicit to explicit to inclusive gay-themed advertising

In line with the general trend towards more minority and niche-targeted advertising, gay-themed advertising began to pick up steam in the last quarter of the 20th century (Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999). In the western world, led by the USA, social movements and protest marches in the late '60s and '70s and AIDS activism in the '80s contributed to the political and social mobilisation of the LGBTQ community and identified it as clear and visible

consumer segment (Fugate, 1993; Peñaloza, 1996). Although the AIDS crisis saw a major decrease in mainstream gay-themed advertising, the movement regained momentum in the '90s thanks to the growing number of openly LGBTQ celebrities and characters in successful mainstream television series (Sender, 2004).

From that point onwards, marketers displayed a renewed interest to tap into the LGBTQ consumer market (Sender, 2004). Since members of the LGBTQ community who consume gay media are in the minority (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005) and public endorsement of LGBTQ people is now crucial for brands looking to establish themselves as gay-friendly, and thus inclusive (Tuten, 2005, 2006), it is clear that advertising must move beyond gay niche media. As a result, marketers have employed a range of strategies to target this segment in mainstream media. Initially, implicit approaches such as gay window advertising were trialled. This approach involves the portrayal of same-gendered characters whose sexual preferences and relations are ambiguous and avoids any references to heterosexuality, making ambiguity and “purposeful polysemy” key aspects of this gay window strategy (Puntoni *et al.*, 2011; Tindall and Waters, 2013; Tsai, 2012; Um, 2012). Queer tropes (such as being ‘in the closet’ and ‘coming out’) and gay symbolism and iconography (such as the rainbow flag) are also subtly referenced to appeal to members of the LGBTQ community (Puntoni *et al.*, 2011; Sender, 2004; Um, 2012; Um *et al.*, 2015).

Alongside this shift to incorporation within mainstream media, it should be noted that consistency between brands’ external – and thus most visible – dimensions of gay-friendliness (via marketing communications) and their internal dimensions (via support for gay rights and changes in HR policy) has become increasingly important in the West. This is due to concern over accusations of gay-, pink-, or rainbow washing, where companies appear to endorse LGBTQ communities solely for marketing purposes (Ciszek and Pounders, 2020; Ginder and Byun, 2015; Tuten, 2005, 2006). Recent controversies concerning UEFA’s lack of support for its own commercial messages on inclusivity and diversity during the Euro 2020 football championship (held in 2021) made it clear how hyper-conscious the community and its allies are to meaningless marketing stunts (BBC, 2021).

With a growing number of gay-themed advertisements circulating in the mainstream media since the turn of the century, competition over this consumer segment has grown, convincing advertisers to directly and unambiguously target LGBTQ consumers and to take more risks with their content to be able to stand out (Sender, 2004). As a result, ‘out-of-the-closet’ adverts have gradually entered mainstream media, offering – as argued by Tsai (2010) – “clear points of identification for LGBTQ viewers by featuring easily identifiable LGBTQ characters, depicting erotic desire and affection for or between characters of the same sex, and showing support of issues related to the gay rights movement” (Capitalism, Gay Identity, and Gay Advertising section, para. 3). Hedonic product categories that test the boundaries of excess e.g., alcohol and fashion brands, are particularly known for their out-of-the-closet and consequently more controversial gay-themed advertisements (Tindall and Waters, 2013; Tsai, 2010).

In recent years, a new type of explicit gay-themed advert has emerged. These include the inclusion of both straight and LGBTQ characters in ads, dubbed the “gaystreaming strategy” by Tindall and Waters (2013) and “mixed sexual advertisements” by Gong (2019). These adverts are based on the principle of “inclusive, distinction-muting logic”, a term borrowed from Ghaziani (2011) that corresponds to the shift within LGBTQ activism from an oppositional perspective on collective identity (*us versus them*) to an inclusive one (*us and them*). By subsuming LGBTQ people into their overall target audience without focussing overtly on sexual identity (Gong, 2019), these adverts broadcast a message of inclusion and assimilation by representing LGBTQ people in the same way as they would any other consumer. In so doing, depictions of dedicated LGBTQ couples and families have become increasingly common within gay-themed marketing communications (Gong, 2019; Nölke, 2018; Tindall and Waters, 2013). One effective example within the Belgian context is a 2015 video commercial made by Impermo, a Belgian tile brand. The advert includes heterosexual characters as well as gay male and lesbian couples, a single man with a dog and families, all of whom are presented in a range of day-to-day contexts (“Primeur: Belgische reclamespot weldra op Tv,” 2015).

LGBTQ people’s responses to gay-themed advertising

Both studies carried out in the USA (Oakenfull *et al.*, 2008; Tuten, 2005) and in Europe (Puntoni *et al.*, 2011) have found that LGBTQ people prefer gay-themed advertising to its mainstream counterpart. That being said, when it comes to LGBTQ people’s responses to different types of gay-themed advertisements, findings have proven less conclusive. Some American studies have found that LGBTQ people have an equally positive response to implicit and explicit advertisements and have thus recommended the use of implicit gay-themed techniques (e.g., gay window strategy, symbolism and icons) in the mainstream media to provide less ammunition for homophobic viewers (e.g., Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull *et al.*, 2008).

However, this approach has been criticized by some LGBTQ people, given that the subtle and ambivalent character of these adverts functions as a “commercial closet”, thus perpetuating the idea that LGBTQ people should conceal their sexual orientation (Tsai, 2012). Implicit gay-themed advertising is seen as maintaining the status quo in this sense, contributing to the secret, taboo and stigmatising representation of homosexuality that was previously dominant in the West and continues to be in other parts of the world (ILGA Europe, 2021; ILGA World, 2020).

Furthermore, gay window advertisements typically rely on heteronormative portrayals of LGBTQ people to ensure they remain appealing to heterosexual consumers. For this reason, they are sometimes denounced by LGBTQ people for their potential “mainstreaming effect” (Kates, 1999; Sender, 1999). Particularly in western contexts where LGBTQ people have become more visible and validated in the public sphere and consumer markets, marketing and advertising practitioners are often advised to go beyond heteronormative depictions (Eisend and Hermann, 2019; Gong, 2019) .

Building on these critiques, other pieces of research have demonstrated the benefits of out-of-the-closet gay-themed advertisements given some LGBTQ people's appreciation for upfront targeting. This approach also helps dampen the feeling that brands are jumping on the bandwagon without taking any commercial risk (Dotson *et al.*, 2009; Hooten *et al.*, 2009). Gong (2019) and Ciszek and Pounders (2020) came to a similar conclusion in regard to mixed sexual advertisements with LGBTQ people judging them more sincere in their efforts than gay-window adverts.

Context matters

This body of – primarily US-based – research seems to suggest that a more nuanced view of the sociocultural contexts in which LGBTQ people engage with gay-themed advertising is required to understand its very different effects. Eisend and Hermann's (2019) meta-analysis of predominantly western studies on responses to gay-themed advertising among both LGBTQ and straight consumers drew the same conclusion: cultural and temporal context is a critical moderating variable when analysing the effectiveness of gay-themed advertising.

Indeed, considering that levels of acceptance regarding homosexuality differ across the globe, it is inappropriate to generalise when it comes to LGBTQ-related issues (Carroll and Mendos, 2017; ILGA World, 2020). The reasons for divergence in opinion often lie in cultural and political differences, such as countries' religious climate, cultural values and gender norms as well as national legislation on homosexuality (Eisend and Hermann, 2019; Herek and McLemore, 2013). Laws pertaining to the protection and recognition of LGBTQ people are a particularly important contextual determinant of tolerance of homosexuality (van den Akker *et al.*, 2013). However, despite the emancipatory effect of progressive laws, LGBTQ-friendly legislation does not always guarantee actual acceptance and genuine social justice (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). It is therefore crucial to also take into account the lived experiences of LGBTQ people to get a true sense of LGBTQ people's progress (ILGA Europe, 2021; ILGA World, 2020). This is particularly important given the current shift towards so-called 'traditional' values with countries such as Hungary shunning progress in favour of scaling back LGBTQ-friendly legislation or even implementing anti-LGBTQ laws (Reuters, 2021).

While most European literature on the social role of media in LGBTQ people's lives acknowledges that minority consciousness varies according to the opportunities (or lack thereof) to thrive in any given socio-political context (Dhoest *et al.*, 2017), remarkably few studies have taken a contextualised approach to analysing LGBTQ people's responses to gay-themed advertising. One notable exception is the work of Tsai (2012) who found that the manifold ways in which US-based gay men and lesbian women interpreted and evaluated concrete examples of gay window advertising were grounded in politically LGBTQ-hostile climates on a local level. Her findings suggest that when LGBTQ people are acutely aware of their social standing as a disenfranchised group within their lived contexts, implicit gay references and subtle cues are highly appreciated as signs of social mobility, recognition and acceptance (Tsai, 2012).

The fact that LGBTQ people tend to consider possible responses of straight people in their evaluation of gay-themed advertisements also suggests that context is key. For example, Thomas, Trump and Price (2015) established that there are limitations to the positive target market effects of niche-designed advertisements due to the so-called 'dirty-laundry effect' whereby the target audience's perception of how others might view them influences their opinion of the adverts. In the case of gay-themed advertising, this means that LGBTQ people might respond negatively to adverts that they believe portray them in an unflattering light, regardless of whether this depiction is truthful and resonates with their lived experiences and lifestyles. Tsai (2011, 2012) draws similar conclusions, finding that LGBTQ consumers – ever-conscious of their minority-group status – were preoccupied by straight people's opinions of gay-themed adverts. More specifically, LGBTQ people who lived in more hostile environments demonstrated a greater understanding of the potential controversy triggered by out-of-the-closet advertising and thus greatly valued advertisers' covert efforts to target them. Given that some LGBTQ people consider advertising to be a powerful form of self-representation to general audiences (Tsai, 2012), they often placed themselves in the shoes of straight or even homophobic viewers when evaluating these adverts. These findings also indicate that LGBTQ people value advertisements' positive portrayals of their community due to the shifts in mindset among the general population that they help engender.

Probably the most critical field of tension that western LGBTQ people navigate when assigning meaning to their identities, lifestyles and political struggles concerns the issue of liberation versus assimilation (Mulé, 2016). Whereas the liberationist approach is known for a boundary pushing 'struggle' against heteronormative incorporation, the assimilationist approach is defined by normalisation and mainstream incorporation which is mainly to be achieved through legal rights claims. Because of their historical minority status and oppression, LGBTQ emancipation has always oscillated between the right to be different or to 'subcultural distinctiveness' (liberation) and the right to be equal and assimilate with mainstream society (assimilation) (Ghaziani, 2011; Wasshede, 2021). Many critical scholars have pointed out that western LGBTQ movements and communities have shifted towards assimilation; going along with heterosexual norms (Mulé, 2016) and highlighting sameness and inclusion with heterosexuals (Ghaziani, 2011; Ghaziani *et al.*, 2016). Dubbed the 'Post-Gay Era' (Ghaziani, 2011) and 'Post-Marriage Equality Era' (Kerrigan, 2021), the current context in which many western LGBTQ people live is characterised by social progress, legal achievements and full citizenship. Media content, including advertising content (McDonald *et al.*, 2021), has mirrored this shift with LGBTQ narratives focussing more on hetero- and gender-normative narratives and representations than conflict, suffering and struggle (Kerrigan, 2021; Monaghan, 2021). As argued by Wasshede (2021, p. 158), homonormativity – the moderate way of being gay (good, decent, normal, white, well-functioning, productive)– is now the dominant paradigm in many liberal western societies.

The Belgian context

With its linguistic, cultural and political landscape driving early legislative and cultural change, Belgium is a somewhat atypical example of a LGBTQ-friendly society. As one of the first countries to extend civil marriage (2003) and adoption (2006) rights to same-sex couples, the nation was a trailblazer in the LGBTQ equality

movement. Several converging factors in the late 20th century helped create fertile ground for change. The country already had an advanced secularisation process and a media environment offering positive representations of LGBTQ people before it became commonplace (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011; Vanlee *et al.*, 2018). Belgium was also known for its well-established LGBTQ umbrella organisations that favoured pragmatism over radical activism. With its right-based claims and preference for dialogue, the Belgian LGBTQ movement and community was the poster child for the assimilationist approach as described earlier. This unique environment facilitated the creation of the ‘velvet triangle’ – the intersection of policy, academia, and civil-society organisations – whereby LGBTQ movements could help mould the political agenda to bring about real change for their communities. Finally, the rare formation of a ‘rainbow coalition’ that did not include the Christian Democrats (CD&V formerly CVP) following the 1999 federal elections, offered a unique window of opportunity for progressive change on LGBTQ-related matters. The coalition subsequently lived up to its name by creating a legal framework that promoted and guaranteed equal rights for the LGBTQ community (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011).

However, the current liberal social context does not necessarily equate to total acceptance of non-heterosexual orientations, even among the younger generations who grew up in this progressive era (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010; Versmissen *et al.*, 2011). This highlights the chasm between legislation and attitudes once again. The amount of press coverage received by a Zwitsal commercial in Belgium highlights this issue (De Meyer, 2019). The baby product brand explicitly challenged the notion of the ‘nuclear’ family by portraying a gay male couple with a child. Though the advertisement was considered ground-breaking, some have questioned Zwitsal’s motives by suggesting that the company’s commercial prospects and motives were behind its decision to offer a more diverse view of family units (adm, 2019). Adding to that, studies show that typical forms of discrimination are increasingly eclipsed by modern homonegativity. This implicit and often unconscious homonegativity manifests itself as a tolerance of LGBTQ people provided that their lifestyles do not deviate significantly from heterosexual norms (Dierckx *et al.*, 2017; Versmissen *et al.*, 2011). Given the recent gains made by political parties promoting traditionalist values and the rise of hate speech against minority groups (ILGA World, 2020), it is clear that LGBTQ communities are facing renewed hostility in Belgium. However, unlike the US, the Belgian system of multiparty governments is less conducive to political polarization on LGBTQ issues.

The study

Reception research

In an attempt to unveil which social knowledge and experience LGBTQ people rely on when evaluating different gay-themed advertising strategies, and how this (hypothetically) affect their receptiveness to gay-themed adverts, we adopted a media reception studies approach. One of the basic starting principles of this approach is that people’s daily lives provide the socially and historically conditioned context in which media are engaged with. By conducting qualitative interviews and letting people tell in their own words how they feel and think about specific media, reception researchers are sensitised to the ways in which people bring in concrete social

experiences, knowledge, situations, reminiscences, interactions they have with family, friends, colleagues, etc. (Bullo, 2014; Schrøder, 2000, 2019).

However, interviews about media often result in heterogeneous and messy commentaries on what media mean to people, reflecting the multifaceted and complexly context-dependent character of media reception. To bring order to this, we used Schrøder's (2000) multidimensional model of reception as a tool for empirically categorizing how people's responses to media is both constituted by and constitutive of sociocultural practices in the wider society. This model presents six dimensions that are at play when people engage with and respond to media and advertising specifically (Schrøder, 1997). A first group of dimensions is related to the question how people make sense of the media message they are exposed to and is concerned with how meanings are produced in specific situational contexts. The first dimension here is motivation and relates to people's idea of a given media message as worthwhile or worth investing attention in it. It supposes that there has to be a link of relevance between the media message people are exposed to and their personal universe and daily life. The second dimension is about comprehension and pertains to the ways in which people are able to understand a specific message by connecting it to social knowledge and experience. The third dimension is discrimination and refers to the awareness of constructedness of the media message and the elements that play a role in the production of the message. Position, the fourth dimension in the model, relates to people's agreement or disagreement with what they perceive to be the message. In articulating a position to the media message, people draw on the realities of their daily lives. A second group of dimensions hints at the potential social implications or effects of media reception. Two dimensions can be distinguished here. Evaluation, the first one, implies that the researcher aims to situate people's ideas and feelings in larger socio-cultural formations of ideas and convictions and to rate how the media message is mobilized as a resource for political action. With implementation, the final dimension, the researcher looks for indications of how people experience the media message as something that might influence practice and behaviour.

Research participants

Given the considerable shift in attitudes and legislation over the past few decades, our sample was purposely drawn from a specific generation that was socialized in the same socio-political and cultural context. Since Belgium saw the most progression in LGBTQ matters from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, we chose to focus on the so-called 'Millennial' generation. Raised in a somewhat more materialistic and media-saturated society than previous generations, this group is also interesting to study from a marketing and advertising perspective (Smith, 2012; Valentine and Powers, 2013). Aside from age, it was also vital that participants self-identified as LGBTQ and had completed their coming-out process given that many interview questions related to these topics.

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling with multiple entry points within the researchers' personal networks. This sampling method was selected due to the hard-to-reach, 'invisible' nature of the target population and the absence of an appropriate sampling frame (Hartman, 2011; Meezan and Martin, 2012). It proved very difficult to recruit participants who identified as bisexual, perhaps due to sexual identification most often being

determined by current sexual behaviour or gender of current partner (Hartman, 2011; Meezan and Martin, 2012). Only one participant in a heterosexual relationship at the time of the study identified as bisexual and was willing to participate as such. Furthermore, the significant number of people contacted who declined to participate in the study hints at a continuing reluctance to openly identify as LGBTQ or to be 'pinned down' by this label.

Data gathering and research ethics

Given the substantive content of this research and LGBTQ people's minority status, significant attention was paid to ethical issues. As the researcher who conducted the interviews claimed LGBTQ membership, a sensitive approach to subject matter and consideration of any delicate issues that could conceivably arise during the interview process was assured. All interviews were conducted at the participants' location of choice – predominantly their own homes – to help establish a safe environment in which they would feel comfortable discussing LGBTQ issues. Participants also filled out an informed consent form which was discussed at the beginning of each interview to ensure they were aware of their rights and understood the purpose of the study. More precisely, it was explained that the interview concerned their experiences as LGBTQ people and their responses to LGBTQ-themed advertising. Participants were also informed that they could choose to withdraw their consent at any time and that the interview was recorded for transcription purposes only. The interviewer also stressed throughout the conversation that participants did not have answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with. Fully informed consent was obtained from all participants. Mindful of "the dynamic arising from the intersubjective, interactional experience of the interview" (Sin, 2005, p. 289), we maintained a rapport with the interviewees throughout the entire process and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. To this end, all names mentioned in our discussion of the findings are pseudonyms.

Following the grounded theory principle of data saturation, interviews were conducted until it became apparent that the data was providing no new conceptual information (Bryman, 2016). Our sample population of 17 young Belgian adults who self-identified as LGBTQ thus ultimately consisted of seven lesbians, seven gay men and three bisexual women with an age range of 19–33. The interviews ranged from 40 to 114 minutes long and relied on a semi-structured interview guide safeguarding the coverage of central topics while allowing for participants to guide the conversation. Probing questions were asked throughout the interview process to obtain more detailed responses and guarantee nuancing (Bryman, 2016).

The interviews opened with low-threshold questions on participants' media use and their perspectives on advertising in general. This was followed by questions on their experiences and positioning within society as members of the LGBTQ community as well as their feelings regarding (mainstream) society's acceptance and attitudes towards LGBTQ people. Finally, a set of print and televised gay-themed advertisements were presented as visual elicitation material.

Elicitation material

The majority of adverts were sourced from AdRespects commercialcloset, the world's largest database of LGBTQ-inclusive advertising (www.commercialcloset.com). Given that advertising evolves with society, advertisers becoming more attentive to social issues and the increased importance of socially responsible advertising practices (McDonald *et al.*, 2021; Middleton and Turnbull, 2021), we acknowledge that the sample of elicitation advertisements is not entirely representative for today's gay-themed advertising. This study however aims to uncover how real lived experiences and social knowledge might affect gay-themed advertising reception. Therefore, the selected advertisements' release date was subordinate to their exemplification value in order to discuss how different gay-themed advertisements – some of which incorporated potentially outdated stereotypes – are received within the study's socio-political and cultural context. Adverts were selected based on their paradigmatic relevance in terms of the various types of gay-themed advertising (e.g., explicitness, gender of featured characters) and the amount of exposure they received in Belgian media. In this way, we compiled a balanced set of implicit and explicit advertisements employing gay iconography or symbolism as well as gay window, out-of-the-closet and mixed sexual approaches.

Both mixed sexual advertisements and out-of-the-closet advertisements presenting a strong message of acceptance and 'love for all' can be considered inclusive advertisements by promoting the idea of a diverse society incorporating LGBTQ people among others. In line with Tsai's (2012) concern, we included a mainstream advert to establish whether the specific research context prompted gay readings of the advertising material presented. As research participants did not tend to focus on LGBTQ themes when shown this advert, we can assume that framing effects are unlikely to have majorly impacted the results of the interviews.

Table I. List of elicitation advertisements

Data-analysis

All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder before being transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. All transcriptions were inductively coded with an openness to new findings in keeping with the coding practices commonly applied in the grounded theory approach, i.e., open coding (opening up the data, identifying patterns); constant comparison (identifying variation, looking for links between categories across all interviews); and theoretical coding (engaging with a core category) (Timonen *et al.*, 2018). During the open coding stage, it became apparent that many responses compared and contrasted Belgian contexts and other national contexts; in particular the US. By comparing the relationship between aspects of gay-themed advertising that the research participants disliked and their lived experience of interacting with mainstream society, we learnt that they tend to adopt LGBTQ-unfriendly rather than LGBTQ-friendly viewpoints in their critical evaluations of the adverts. Finally, the category that, in Timonen's *et al.* (2018, p. 7) words, "incorporates or supersedes other categories in explanatory importance" was the liberation-mainstreaming dialectic which we will discuss later in this article.

Findings

Common threads

Before we discuss participants' responses to the different advertisements, we first draw attention to three leitmotifs identified in their engagement with the topic of gay-themed advertising. Interestingly, many research participants were unfamiliar with the concept of gay-themed advertising, associating it instead with the marketing of specific gay products or venues. The idea that mainstream brands would intentionally target the LGBTQ community through their advertising campaigns was inconceivable for most of the interviewees. In fact, the mere fact that sexual minorities could be a 'theme' in advertising was something of a revelation, suggesting that participants were unaccustomed to LGBTQ visibility in adverts. Given the increasing exposure accorded to gay-themed advertisements by mainstream media outlets (e.g., Nölke, 2018), this was somewhat unexpected. It thus became apparent early on in the interview process that visual elicitations were necessary for participants to be able to discuss the topic in any meaningful way.

The only three times participants could recall a concrete example of gay-themed advertising prior to the presentation of the elicitation adverts was in reference to the aforementioned Belgian tile brand, Impermo. This advertisement – which coincidentally was included in our elicitation material – captured participants' attention because it featured intimacy between same-sex couples, even leading one participant to rewind the commercial and double-check when they came across it on TV. While it is important to note that the advert was being broadcast on Belgian television at the time of data collection and could have subconsciously influenced participants' recall, all three interviewees attributed their recollection of the mixed sexual ad to its divergence from heteronormative mainstream advertising, as explained by Maarten (25, gay male):

Simply because there were no clichés involved, only a gay couple that love each other and are kissing while brushing their teeth and that was...only a split second...probably only a moment of everyday life and that is very common. Just people that love each other and kiss each other. It is great that it was in there and that there was a nod to LGBTQ people. But that was just love. And I liked the fact that it was not a cliché.

The second main finding was that participants tended to make comparisons with other contexts when discussing the advertisements and the brands' motives. The USA most often featured as a benchmark against which the daring and genuineness of gay-themed adverts and marketing materials were measured. In our study, the participants often considered the USA to represent the paradigmatic context of commercial and promotional culture while also viewing it as the birthplace of the LGBTQ community's struggle against oppression. For example, one participant claimed that gay-themed advertising would have greater value for brands in the USA, based on their belief that the LGBTQ subculture was more vibrant and had a greater reach in America than in Belgium.

Despite their awareness of Belgium's ever-present heteronormativity, the fact remains that the Belgian socio-political context is fairly accepting of and open to homosexuality and same-sex couples (interviewees referenced the legalisation of same-sex marriage and second-parent adoption for LGBTQ parents, among other things), especially when compared to other parts of the world. This was reflected in participants' views on why gay-themed advertising is more common in some countries than others. The following excerpt from an interview with Hanne (25, lesbian) is a case in point:

I don't know, for me it works both ways because on the one hand, they [brands] have a broad audience, and I assume they are aware of the fact that a significant part of their audience are LGBTQ people, so there is no way around this. On the other hand, they might alienate a lot of people. It also depends on the continent. For example, in the Western world, McDonalds would be perfectly able to get away with it [gay-themed advertisements], but in other countries they better don't do this because it would be a disaster, I think.

The third common thread across the interviews was participants' inclination to adopt mainstream societies' potentially LGBTQ-friendly or LGBTQ-unfriendly viewpoints in their evaluations of the advertisements. They also tended to critically evaluate the adverts' ability to help or hinder widespread acceptance of LGBTQ people within different contexts with varying levels of gay-friendliness. The dialectic between liberation and assimilation thus proved a central theme in their responses.

Analysis of the data obtained via the interview process revealed that comparisons with other countries, religions or ethnic groups helped participants to assess Belgian society's overall acceptance of the LGBTQ community. While many acknowledged the country's introduction of LGBTQ-friendly legislation, they also drew attention to the persistence of heteronormative views, referring either directly or indirectly to lived experiences of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender nonconformity. This also appears to be reflected in their opinions on gay-themed advertising in Belgian mainstream media. Consider for example Floriane's response to the Chevy advertisement with its "Mom, Dad, I'm Electric" slogan. By decoding the advert within a heteronormative framework, she condemned the slogan for its perceived perpetuation of heteronormativity rather than recognising its normalisation of the coming-out process. Accordingly, she commented that, "if they [advertisers] want to appeal to me, the advertisement should say Mom and ... I don't know ... Mommy I'm electric, or something like that." In keeping with Schröder's (2000) dimension of position, her disagreement with what she understood to be the message of the advertisement made her firmly reject it.

LGBTQ people's awareness of society's heteronormative nature influences their engagement with gay-themed advertising also in other ways. For example, Kirsten (24, lesbian) noted that "a lot of people in Belgium still prefer heterosexual couples to same-sex couples", thus implying that the Belgian public might still show a considerable aversion to explicit gay-themed advertising. While out-of-the-closet advertising does not necessarily involve content that is also explicit in a sexual manner, this might be the case more often with this type of gay-themed

advertises given the explicit nature of this strategy. Accordingly, some participants rejected out-of-the-closet advertisements with explicit references to sexual orientation due to their potential to create controversy. This was especially true with blatant displays of same-sex desire that may prove more contentious. The fact that this remains a concern in Belgium – a country that is considered relatively LGBTQ-friendly – suggests that heteronormativity is still omnipresent.

Critical evaluations of gay-washing

Participants' responses to gay-themed advertising demonstrated a healthy dose of scepticism when it came to brands' underlying motives. Both Ditte (23, lesbian) and Maarten (25, gay male) denounced the approach as "just another marketing strategy" whilst Bart (31, gay male) referenced the well-known catchphrase, "there's no such thing as bad publicity". Interviewees tended to critically analyse whether brands were targeting LGBTQ people out of genuine support for the community or purely for financial gain. Hanne (25, lesbian) commented that many brands seemed to be engaging in gay-washing; offering insincere demonstrations of allyship in an attempt to hop on the current bandwagon:

[...] and I think many brands actually support it [the LGBTQ community], but I think there are also a lot of brands, such as the advertisements of the vehicles, that just capitalise on the topic's popularity because it's a trending topic since it is mentioned a lot in media and the music scene and whatever else. So, I believe some just tag along, which, in fact, is a bit inappropriate, but yeah, some [brands] are like that [...].

Indeed, discrimination appeared to be an important dimension to participants' responses with many criticising brands' co-opting and profit-driven marketing strategies. It is evident then that brands' true motivations are a deciding factor in LGBTQ people's reception of gay-themed adverts. In the excerpt above, Hanne suggests that highly implicit advertisements are akin to gay-washing. In a similar vein, Wietse (33, gay male) asserted that, "if you aim to target a specific audience, then really do this instead of making a silly, subdued attempt. I mean, then you should go all the way." The implication is that brands employing gay window strategies or gay subtexts with the aim of targeting LGBTQ people could be regarded as trying to have their cake and eat it. A comment made by Maarten (25, gay male) in reference to implicit adverts incorporating rainbow colours supports this critical stance:

Rainbow colours... That is so obvious. In my opinion, as a company, this is too little effort because... that's playing it safe... It's like with Absolut Rainbow, that is really playing it safe. By making this subtle hint, they appeal to LGBTQ people but not straight people, so they don't offend anyone. I believe that they're not making any effort.

Critical evaluations of the dirty laundry effect

Despite some research participants' appreciation of explicit gay-themed advertisements, their preference for mainstream assimilation over activism-driven liberation was most apparent in their considerations of the dirty laundry effect. The belief that gay-themed advertising is also capable of inducing a distorted view of LGBTQ people was highlighted by Tomas (26, gay male) when describing his lived experience of this phenomenon:

Yes, I notice this with my own surrounding, then all straight people think all gay males are cheating sluts. [...] And advertisements like that strengthen that illusion, while in fact most gay males I know are nothing like that. Of course, there are... many gay males do have more sexual partners compared to the average straight person. That is characteristic of the community, but with advertisements like that they confirm this even more and, in my opinion, this shouldn't be highlighted.

This accords with earlier observations, which showed that LGBTQ people often have the potential responses of straight people to (stereo)typical gay-themed advertisements at the back of their mind. However, in contrast to US-based studies such as Thomas *et al.*, (2015), we found no evidence that concerns over a dirty laundry effect inevitably brings a desire for ever-positive, in this case normative, representation. Instead, participants expressed a wish for more "truthful" and "authentic" portrayals of LGBTQ people, hinting at the diverse and unconventional ways of being gay to avoid the perpetuation of one-dimensional stereotypes in the public mind.

Critical evaluations of explicit lesbian-themed advertising

Monosemic readings emerged when it came to out-of-the-closet advertisements featuring lesbians. Notably, when evaluating explicit gay-themed adverts for fashion and alcohol brands, participants agreed that those depicting attractive, hyper-feminised women (dubbed 'lipstick lesbians' – see for example, Sender, 2004; Tsai, 2010) in close physical proximity or in suggestive poses, were in fact targeting heterosexual men. This suggests that the representation of gender-normative lesbians in the media is not so much assimilative as harmful to the LGBTQ cause. For example, Maarten (25, gay male) pointed out that the target demographic of a beer advertisement depicting two conventionally attractive women kissing each other "isn't even lesbians, but just men." The assumption that brands were trying to capitalise on the erotic fantasies of heterosexual men rather than trying to genuinely engage with LGBTQ people naturally resulted in negative responses to these adverts. This summed up by Floriane (26, lesbian):

Yet again I think of this as erotic-orientated, whereby I consider this... I doubt whether they [the advertisers] mean well... I doubt whether their real intention is to pay more attention to the representation of LGBTQ people or whether their intention is just to attract people's attention by trying a different approach.

Positive evaluations of explicit gay-themed advertising

Our findings suggest that gay-themed advertising – if not *too* subtle – is viewed as a brave endorsement of the LGBTQ community. Participants indicated that a certain amount of risk-taking was necessary for brands to be positively received by an LGBTQ audience. The context of liberation versus assimilation was demonstrated by interviewees' discussion of risk within the wider context of social acceptance of homosexuality, with the USA once again employed as a frame of reference. For example, Maarten (25, gay male) commented that:

[...] and, especially for Americans, that's a matter of having guts. For us, that's a normal thing. Here you would come across that [gay-themed advertisements] more easily. I would find it more common with Opel or Peugeot because that's more, well, the European culture. But this really is bold knowing it's a brand of the United States.

Given that the participants considered the socio-political context in the USA to be less progressive than Belgium in terms of acceptance of LGBTQ people, this excerpt highlights the belief that gay-themed advertisements in the USA would engender more risks and greater controversy than in Belgium. Consequently, the interviewees praised US brands for the use of gay-themed advertising in their country of origin and judged implicit gay-themed US advertisements more favourably than their Belgian counterparts. Here we see that in acknowledging the elements of the production context of the advertisements (i.e. dimension of discrimination), the participants were more easily inclined to applaud the boldness of explicit gay-themed advertising coming from the US. Hans (25, gay male), for example, alluded to this in his response to the out-of-the closet Diesel advertisement depicting two male sailors kissing:

The aim of advertising is to be remembered and sometimes trying to shock. I think particularly if that advertisement is intended for the US, which is more conservative and where certain people will think it's shocking, it will be talked about.

Whereas responses to explicit gay-themed adverts were coloured by the delicate balancing act involved in pushing the mainstream assimilation agenda just far enough, negative assessments of overly explicit gay-themed advertisements were at times mitigated by the type of product being advertised. This was evident in Maarten's (25, gay male) appraisal of the explicit gay-themed Dolce & Gabbana ad: "you don't expect advertisements of a man and a woman dressed in Dolce & Gabbana displayed in a park together with their children." Given that fashion brands are known for their edgier approach to advertising and often controversial campaigns, consumers moderate their opinions accordingly. However, as Bart (31, gay male) and Wietse (33, gay male) pointed out, the opposite can also be true. While both men reacted positively to explicit Dolce & Gabbana advertisement, they also stressed that this kind of advertising would not be appropriate for "an everyday consumer product" such as Evian.

Advertising an inclusive society

The combining of the analytical dimensions of position, evaluation and implementation clearly revealed that evaluations of gay-themed advertisements were interlinked with the socio-political function that advertisements are believed to serve. As argued by Meijer (1998) and Schroeder and Borgerson (2005), marketing and advertising images have the potential to reach beyond their traditional scope and create a ripple effect throughout society. The present study upheld this theory. Whilst acknowledging that levels of LGBTQ acceptance vary from country to country, all research participants agreed that Belgium has room for improvement. Despite being relatively progressive in terms of pro-LGBTQ attitudes and legislation, particularly when compared to other parts of the world, the country has yet to achieve complete normalisation and acceptance. Echoing Belgian research on straight peoples' attitudes towards sexual minorities and Flemish LGBTQ people's reported experiences of modern homonegativity, some participants considered homosexuality to be tolerated rather than genuinely accepted and normalised:

They [people] make it look like they're open to it, but once they are actually confronted with LGBTQ people there still seems to be a barrier. I can observe this at work. Some of my colleagues are open to it, but you note that if it were their kids, it would be an issue. (Wietse, 33, gay male)

Tomas' (26, gay male) testimony also allude to the continuing modern homonegativity present in Belgian society: "Yes and no. There is an understanding for homosexuals, but I feel like a lot of people don't want it to be expressed too visibly. It is accepted, but in their opinion, homosexuals should not exaggerate".

The social role played by advertisements within a specific socio-political context (the implementation dimension of our analysis) may impact reception of said adverts. This was demonstrated by Bart (31, gay male) in his evaluation of an American, out-of-the-closet Diesel advertisement: "especially if this advertisement is intended for the US, which I guess is more conservative, some people will think this is shocking, and it will be discussed. And then it is a successful advertisement." Participants' positive responses to explicit gay-themed advertising that celebrates difference within traditionally more LGBTQ-hostile societies aligns with the idea of liberation. This suggests that context is key when it comes to evaluating whether or not an advert will further enhance acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

In discussing the societal relevance of gay-themed advertising in terms of 'normalisation', 'habituation' and 'breaking stigmas', it became clear that said adverts were considered to play a mediating role in promoting widespread acceptance and normalisation of LGBTQ people. Despite the view that advertisements alone are incapable of driving change in public opinion, gay-themed advertising is considered to contribute to the public debate on sexuality and normalisation of LGBTQ people by disseminating carefully considered, authentic images.

Returning to the Belgian context, mixed sexual advertisements portraying both straight and LGBTQ people (e.g., Impermo) were greenlighted by the majority of participants and often considered the best strategy for targeting

the LGBTQ segment. Rather than drawing attention to themselves or eliciting controversy, most LGBTQ people seemed to attach greater importance to accurate representation and accentuation of their sameness with straight people (mainstream assimilation). This was illustrated by a general unease in regard to adverts that targeted solely the LGBTQ segment with many participants feeling that it highlighted their differences in much the same way as LGBTQ activities and bars. Accordingly, gay-themed advertisements that portrayed LGBTQ people as being no different from their straight counterparts were well-received, reflecting the importance of normalisation in a country that has moved beyond the struggle for LGBTQ recognition and rights.

Adverts broadcasting a wider message of diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance also received positive feedback. Aside from Impermo, the Bjorn Borg 'love for all' advertisement was a prime example of this. Despite the propensity for controversy given the absence of traditional gender roles, the advert featuring a priestess marrying two male priests in a church filled with supportive onlookers drew positive remarks from research participants. This approach could thus prove highly successful for brands looking to target the Belgian LGBTQ community. By portraying different groups as equal, these advertisements reflect LGBTQ people's desire for accurate representation. This was highlighted by Lukas (24, gay male) who commented that, "I welcome the fact that a famous brand... the brand takes a stance by carrying out a message that everyone is equal." The portrayal of diverse yet equal characters in advertisements thus helps pave the way for a fully tolerant and inclusive society. However, it is important to note that these findings could differ between socio-political contexts. In Belgium, the shift from activism and 'struggle' to inclusion and assimilation could explain why adverts that highlighted sameness were preferred to those that focussed on homosexuality.

Similarly, participants raised the issue of diversity in contemporary advertising. To ensure that ads reflect the current social reality to the greatest extent possible, they recommended that besides LGBTQ people also, for example, people with disabilities and non-white people should be given greater visibility in adverts. The belief in a global shift towards more realistic and accurate representations of all segments of society was summed up by Tina (33, lesbian):

I would prefer a mix [of mainstream and gay-themed advertisements]. And here, I have in mind that if a 70–30 ratio is achieved, it would already be great. I think so. I believe it is like this with everything. For me, a 50–50 ratio is not necessary because then it's also not a good representation of society, but in my opinion it [homosexuality] should definitely be represented.

This indicates that LGBTQ people's engagement with gay-themed advertisements is characterised by a tension between ideological and political positioning. Not only are responses context dependent, but they also reflect the ongoing dialectic between liberation and assimilation.

With many participants' pointing to the lack of LGBTQ representation and overall diversity within advertising, there is a clear opportunity for brands to capitalise on this sentiment through their portrayal of society.

Interviewees recall of the mixed sexual advertisement also reveals a desire for more normalised representations of their community and consequently mainstream assimilation.

Discussion

In an effort to reinvigorate current marketing debates on gay-themed advertising, this study builds on theoretical insights gained via media reception studies and LGBTQ studies. Our approach has allowed us to analyse the various facets of advert reception and has thus yielded a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of LGBTQ people's engagement with various gay-themed ads. By actively interrogating reception practices, our research also reflects on the ethical issues surrounding minority representation in advertising and marketing from the perspective of the consumer groups concerned, thereby contributing to theorization of advertising reception and the social role of advertising. This last point is of critical importance given that advertising offers promises of social rewards while promoting aspirational narratives of belonging, social acceptance and the good society (Meijer, 1998; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005).

As to the first research question concerning the types of social knowledge and experience LGBTQ people rely on when evaluating different gay-themed adverts, our results demonstrate that context is key. By offering a common stock of social knowledge and experience, it creates a benchmark against which LGBTQ people can measure their approval of specific advertisements. Contextual awareness was repeatedly signposted when study participants explained their thoughts and feelings about each advert. Interestingly, the majority tended to cross-reference when forming an opinion on the elicitation material. While only one of the advertisements was for a US brand, many participants displayed a remarkable America-centrism in their attitudes and critical stances. This suggests that the parameters that frame European LGBTQ consumers' discussion of the commercial and political aspects of LGBTQ culture are determined by North America's dominance in advertising-orientated and consumer-based media culture. Other European and non-western societies that are more openly hostile to the LGBTQ community were also employed as points of reference in justifying why implicit gay-themed advertisements are more appropriate in particular contexts.

Conversely, many participants considered implicit gay-themed adverts to be complacent and deceitful in a Belgian context. However, this did not imply a global appreciation of their explicit counterparts. All interviewees navigated the dialectic of liberation and assimilation and explored how each advert could contribute to a representation of LGBTQ people based on both difference *and* belonging. As we pointed out earlier in this article, the western societies' shift towards equal citizenship and rights for LGBTQ people has resulted in politics of inclusion in all aspects of society, including markets. This was clearly reflected in our results. The relatively early breakthrough in Belgian legislation accompanied by increased visibility and improved media representations of LGBTQ people in the media most probably explains participants' positioning within the liberation-assimilation dialectic. A solid political framework that guarantees equality via legal rights reduces the need for activism and thus encourages an assimilationist approach. Hence, in contrast to earlier findings in rather LGBTQ-unfriendly contexts such as the USA (Tsai, 2011; 2012), this research proves that open and inclusive contexts are likely to

engender dissimilar and perhaps more critical attitudes toward the different gay-themed approaches. Responding to the second research question, this shows that the reception of different gay-themed advertising strategies as well as LGBTQ people's preference of the way in which they are targeted, are affected by the social climate of acceptance in which the advertisements are received.

However, the persistence of homonegativity in Belgium and further afield clearly influenced participants' evaluation of the adverts. To some extent in accordance with previous research findings (e.g. Thomas, Trump and Price, 2015; Tsai, 2011, 2012), their consideration of the potentially negative reactions of straight people, their concerns of a dirty laundry effect and their desire for authentic representation suggests that LGBTQ consumers still feel that they are not fully accepted or assimilated into mainstream Belgian society. The tension between liberation and assimilation appears to be alleviated best by inclusive gay-themed advertisements. Participants tended to prefer these ads thanks to their portrayal of LGBTQ people as full members of society alongside straight people and other minority groups. Overall, this study strengthens the theoretical idea that for LGBTQ people, as historically subjugated groups, mainstream market recognition is a significant symbolic site in which they can negotiate the longstanding tension between liberation and assimilation. The data highlight the social importance of advertising, as argued by McDonald *et al.* (2021), not only in promoting civic inclusion and social recognition of minority groups but also in having the potential to play a key role in the construction and normalization of identities.

Managerial implications

This study bears witness to the importance and social relevance of gay-themed advertising to LGBTQ people as well as the country-specific knowledge and experiences that shape their opinions. Rather than embracing gay-themed advertising as a 'one-size-fits-all' template for the 'global gay', our findings indicate that LGBTQ people evaluate these adverts in a local context of social acceptance and tolerance. For brands, this means that consideration of the relevant socio-political context is vital when targeting this particular consumer segment. As far as the Belgian context is concerned, it is clear that self-assured LGBTQ consumers, which our participants mostly leaned to be, are very conscious of brands' true intentions when it comes to gay-themed advertising. Companies must thus tread carefully; striking a careful balance between not enough and too much. While fashion house and other hedonic product brands have slightly more leeway when it comes to sexually orientated gay-themed advertising, for other brands the window of tolerance is slim. Furthermore, participants' lack of familiarity of gay-themed advertising and their critical stance vis-à-vis gay-washing issues dictates that marketers make well-considered choices that accurately reflect the social realities and media cultures of their chosen contexts.

As evidenced by this study, implicit and ambiguous gay-themed adverts can be perceived as outdated in countries where the dominant paradigm has shifted to tolerance and inclusion of the LGBTQ community. If brands then want to capitalise on the LGBTQ consumer segment, marketers must be prepared to take risks and go 'all the way.' When targeting younger and possibly savvier LGBTQ consumers, they should also be ever-

conscious of potential backlash and accusations of gay-washing. The criticism of lesbian-themed advertising by research participants also indicates that hinting at intimacy between women without relying on queer aesthetics is considered exploitative. To avoid being accused of capitalising on the lesbian theme to attract heterosexual men, brands targeting the LGBTQ segment would do better to include gay males in their advertisements.

The predominantly positive reception of inclusive advertising among participants suggests that this may be the holy grail of advertising. By targeting the broadest audience possible in countries where mainstream assimilation prevails, brands can offer a more realistic portrayal of contemporary western societies. Considering that many LGBTQ people in more progressive contexts want to mute differences with mainstream society and instead highlight sameness, inclusive advertising strategies are strongly recommended. These types of advertisements also seem to resonate positively with heterosexual consumers in liberal countries (Gong, 2019).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any piece of research, it is important to draw attention to the limitations of this study. First off, our sample does not reflect the diversity of the LGBTQ community as a whole. All participants were white, middle-class, educated and demonstrated a significant degree of advertising scepticism. A similar study focussing on less empowered members of the LGBTQ community could have very different outcomes. By incorporating people from a range of ethnocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, the sample would likely offer a more accurate representation of the LGBTQ community. Secondly, while focussing on a specific generation helps prevent any temporal distortion of results, our research participants all belonged to a generation known for its self-assurance. Their experiences growing up in a more inclusive and tolerant society could also colour their reception of gay-themed adverts. Finally, by using existing brand advertisements as elicitation material, it is possible that interviewees' prior knowledge of and attitudes towards these companies could have influenced their feedback.

Concerning the reception of gay-themed advertising in a Belgian context, future research could offer more nuanced insights by exploring possible differences between rural and urban areas when it comes to the acceptance of LGBTQ people and their reception of gay-themed adverts. Adding to that, future research could build on our findings by analysing in greater depth the ways in which the liberation-assimilation dialectic influences the reception of gay-themed advertising. This can be achieved by conducting research on the reception of gay-themed advertising in more polarised societies. Furthermore, comparative research between LGBTQ-(un)friendly opposite contexts would offer deeper insights, as for example a cross-national European comparison that contrasts various cultural and political contexts. The same is true for cross-generational research that allows for a comparison of LGBTQ people's different socialization contexts and how this affects their reception of gay-themed advertising. Last but not least, the incorporation of less privileged LGBTQ consumers from western countries could shed light on how complex, open-ended and variable the realities of audience-advertising interactions really are.

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