



Representation matters: perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the topic of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising texts. Our investigation offers a dual perspective. In the first part of the article, which is the most comprehensive one, we examine the key issues relevant to understanding the nature of contemporary advertising. We focus on the transformations that advertising communication is undergoing in a highly connected and information-driven world, which imposes new expectations, particularly regarding young audiences. We identify and analyze major trends and techniques that transform advertising communication into social and cultural texts. A defining aspect of contemporary advertising is inclusivity, and our article specifically highlights LGBTQ+ inclusive messaging. The second part of the article aims to identify the main characteristics of how LGBTQ+ individuals are represented in advertisements that have won the Grand Prix and Gold prizes in specific categories at the Cannes Lions Festival over a five-year period, from 2020 to 2024.

Keywords: advertising, commodity activism, LGBTQ+ representation, inclusive advertisements, Cannes Lions

Introduction

With its rise as a global phenomenon, advertising has become a form of communication with a significant impact on community life, profound implications for interpersonal relationships, and an extraordinary ability to integrate vast cultural regions (Frunză, 2014). As a result, it has evolved into “cultural and social texts about us and others” (Toland & Mueller, 2003, 118).

Starting from the idea of a reconsideration of the place and the role of advertising communication in contemporary society, this article examines LGBTQ+ representations in advertising texts.

In the first part of the article, we focus on key concepts necessary for understanding contemporary advertising, which is, to some extent, shaped by the trend of commodity activism.

This sets the stage for our later shift to LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising. The second part takes an empirical approach, analyzing a selection of advertisements to identify key characteristics of how LGBTQ+ individuals and communities are represented.

In this part we address two main questions:

How are LGBTQ+ individuals portrayed in Cannes Lions-winning advertisements in terms of roles, relationships, and the presence of stereotypes?

And, to what extent do these ads incorporate activist messages related to LGBTQ+ advocacy, inclusivity, social justice, and anti-discrimination?

The longstanding debate over whether advertising merely reflects society or actively transforms it continues. While some argue that advertising predominantly mirrors societal trends, others believe it has the power to shape behaviors and attitudes, ultimately influencing society as a whole (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997). Much of the criticism directed at advertising focuses on its social implications, while its defense typically highlights its economic objectives. Critics argue that advertising undermines fundamental values by appealing to basic needs rather than higher motivations, promoting excessive materialism, conspicuous consumption, vanity, and status-seeking behavior. By introducing new products, advertising is said to create dissatisfaction with existing possessions, shifting society from a "work-oriented production ethic" to a "consumption-oriented live for today ethic" (Lantos, 1987). A more moderate perspective suggests that advertising does not create values, but rather activates latent values that already exist beneath the surface. From this standpoint, advertising is "one of the leading edges" (Fox *apud* in Lantos, 1987) that facilitates and accelerates cultural change.

Marketers and agencies continuously strive to fully understand consumer motivations and sensitivities, actively monitoring cultural movements and trends that can be mirrored in advertising and leveraged for potential profit. For example, the representation of women in advertising across time is an issue that is often viewed as harmful. Stereotyping women in advertising is pervasive, either objectifying them or portraying them as the ideal housewives. Yet, such an image is simply a distorted representation of the buyer. The gender display in advertising texts must be read as "symptoms and not as portraits", since the power of advertising is to "naturalize an order of things that we are unable to challenge" (Goffman, 1978).

Contemporary advertising is less about obvious persuasion and more about delivering an exceptional experience that leaves a lasting impression on customers. Thus, many critics argue that advertising significantly influences consumer behavior and shapes cultural values. They contend that advertisers promote superficial materialism by fostering a "false consciousness" and distorting the symbols that underpin human connection (Wharton, 2013).

The influence of advertising has grown substantially, impacting society in both positive and negative ways, depending on the message content and its alignment with the values, norms, and culture of the community. Selecting the right message is crucial for successful advertising, as it can shape how individuals perceive their needs, desires, and self-identity, especially when delivered through multiple media channels. Research highlights the role of advertising in both reflecting and shaping society's shared beliefs. One study, for instance, explored how mass media was used to advocate for social transitions that disrupted traditional cultures, replacing them with pseudo-cultures (Yazdanparast, 2018). This research applied Adorno's pseudo-culture theory (1959) to examine the influence of political ideologies on social change through mass-mediated marketing images, analyzing print advertisements over 48 years.

Jiangli (2015) has pointed out that American brands in China not only advertise their products and services, but also project American values, culture, and lifestyle through their campaigns, particularly targeting Chinese teenagers and the middle class. Jiangli views this as a critical aspect of American soft power, aligning with the three pillars of public diplomacy: daily communication, strategic messaging, and relationship building. According to Jiangli, these brands have the potential to move beyond merely promoting cultural values, ultimately challenging the preservation of Chinese cultural identity (Jiangli, 2015).

Advertisements that incorporate messages of empowerment and inclusion of marginalized groups, which may not always align with widely accepted views, come with both risks and rewards. Despite living in democratic societies, resistance to difference and deviations from social norms still exists. In this context, contemporary advertising is a dynamic and constantly evolving field, shaped by technological advancements, changing consumer behaviors, and social evolution. By embracing new technologies, data-driven strategies, and storytelling techniques, brands can create more engaging and impactful campaigns that resonate with audiences and deliver real results. However, as the advertising landscape evolves, it is crucial for brands to prioritize social responsibility in their messaging and actions. Today's consumers are increasingly aware of social and environmental issues and expect the brands they support to embody these values.

Social awareness: new demands on advertising

New generations, such as Generation Z and Generation Alpha, are profoundly altering the advertising sector. As a result of growing up in a society where they are continuously bombarded with advertising messages, these generations have become more knowledgeable and skeptical customers. Conventional advertising strategies, such as TV commercials and billboards, no longer have the same effect over these generations as they did in the past. Instead, younger generations are more likely to conduct their own research, relying on social media and online reviews to guide their purchase decisions. As a result, brands need to develop new strategies that account for the key characteristics of the younger generation in order to effectively reach these consumers and build lasting brand loyalty (Weise, 2018).

Recent technological breakthroughs have prompted global companies to change their marketing methods to catch the attention of Generation Z, often known as digital natives. This generation, born between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, has distinct views, tastes, and values that affect their behavior and necessitate tailored marketing techniques (Chaney et al., 2017). Generation Z is the most connected and aware generation to date, spending a significant amount of time on digital platforms and employing numerous tools due to earlier exposure to technology (Tabassum et al., 2020). As a result, marketers must use real-time and narrative content to appeal to this generation rather than generic marketing approaches that may or may not be effective.

Narrative or storytelling advertisements are one style of advertisement that is excellent at eliciting emotional reactions and customer involvement. Recent research has revealed that storytelling advertising is more likely to provoke emotions in viewers, and facial coding experiments have showed that when viewing a narrative ad, viewers are more likely to demonstrate facial expressions (Madura, Nowacki, 2018). Gen Z likes brands and goods that represent their personality and prefers accessible and real content (Williams, 2020). Narrative advertising enables people to envision themselves using the promoted product or service, making it a powerful marketing tool.

Another notable trend in marketing to younger generations is the use of cause marketing. These generations tend to be more socially and environmentally conscious than previous ones, often gravitating toward brands that align with their values. Cause marketing involves collaborating with nonprofit organizations or supporting social and environmental causes to strengthen brand loyalty (Molinillo et al., 2020). Hence, it enables brands to foster a sense of community with their customers, and the new generations are more likely to remain loyal to companies they believe are making a positive impact on the world.

Gen Zers are often self-motivated, compassionate, and value collaboration and social interaction. They prioritize "flexibility, relevance, authenticity, and non-hierarchical leadership" while addressing inherited challenges like climate change with a pragmatic mindset (Dimock, 2019). When targeting Gen Z, advertisers need to be more innovative than when appealing to previous generations. Southgate (2017) found that Gen Z respondents had a more favorable attitude toward creative online advertising compared to older generations.

Social activism has gained significant momentum in recent years, largely driven by younger generations who are at the forefront of this movement. Millennials and Generation Z are enthusiastic about social justice and equality, and they are using their voices and social media platforms to raise awareness of problems that are important to them. Racial and gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, and political reform are among the subjects addressed. Businesses and brands must pay attention as new generations grow more politically and socially active and adjust their tactics to match the needs of this socially conscious and politically involved audience (Coray, 2022). Taking into account the interests and beliefs of these new generations is essential for building a strong relationship with them and fostering a positive brand image. Although Generation Z has a broad set of political beliefs, its core principles stress equality, respect, and inclusion for all people (Dimock, 2019). Pluralistic ideas such as freedom of speech, inclusive identities, and equality play an important role in developing Gen Z's brand trust (Fromm & Read, 2018). Gen Z is promoting gender inclusion in society and seeks to support progressive brands that represent their ideals. This generation expects inclusiveness and diversity in brand communication and marketing (Dorsey & Villa, 2020).

For Generation Z, the importance of ethics is primarily reflected in a company's commitment to corporate social responsibility, particularly in promoting social equity and eco-friendly and sustainable practices (Ferrell et al., 2019). In the context of a hyperconsumption society, defined by strategic ethics (Lipovetsky, 2006) consumption becomes an issue of individual identity, not just a simple purchase (Klopota et al., 2020; Kornberger, 2010). Thus, we can identify two major directions that shape the new generation's ethical interest: social and environmental. As a general trend, Generation Z is highly concerned with human rights and ethnic diversity, and they are socially engaged, expecting corporations to reflect these values. This is especially true in advertising, where they prefer to see ethnic diversity represented (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Furthermore, as a result of climate change, Gen Z incorporates sustainability in their lifestyle choices, and this interest is projected to rise in the future years (GWI, 2022). Rather than just leading an ethical lifestyle themselves, Generation Z expects businesses to align with their social and environmental values and actively advocate for these causes (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Thus, businesses must hold themselves accountable for their conduct in order to gain Gen Zers' trust.

Brands must be honest and accountable in supporting equality on social media to interact with Gen Z, and social listening is becoming increasingly important. Schmidt et al. (2021) discovered that brands that take a socio-political stance have a more distinct brand identity and are seen as more trustworthy. Yet, authenticity is crucial (Duplantier, 2016), since Gen Zers tend to want a long-term commitment that is consistent with the brand's values and strategy.

Commodity activism

Commodity activism, also referred to as consumer activism or ethical consumption, is a growing movement that utilizes consumer choices to influence corporate behavior. The premise is that ,by buying products made ethically and sustainably, consumers can signal to companies and push them to change their practices (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). This movement is rooted in the belief that corporations have an obligation to operate in a socially and environmentally responsible way, and that consumers can hold them accountable through their purchasing power (Dabija et al., 2020). Commodity activism may take numerous forms, from boycotting unethical corporations to supporting fair trade items and campaigning for reforms in corporate laws and practices (Lightfoot, 2019).

One of commodity activism's strengths is that it reinforces the consumer's voice. Consumers may help build demand for these sorts of items and motivate other brands to change by choosing to support companies that are committed to ethical and environmental operations. This can have a cascading impact, as more businesses understand that consumers care about these concerns and are prepared to base purchase decisions on them. Commodity activism, however, has limitations. For one thing, knowing which items are actually ethical and sustainable can be challenging, as corporations may make false or misleading statements about their methods. Furthermore, not all consumers have the financial capacity to buy ethically manufactured items, and others may prioritize other aspects above ethical ones, such as price or convenience.

Communicating inclusivity in advertising

A key concern for new generations that impacts how brands engage with them is the commitment to respecting the rights of various minority groups. For far too long, advertising has reinforced harmful stereotypes while failing to represent accurately the society's diversity. People of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, and persons with disabilities have been underrepresented or misrepresented in advertising campaigns, resulting in a lack of visibility and erasure of their experiences (Unilever, 2021). This lack of representation has major effects, including the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and the reinforcement of social prejudices. Furthermore, when certain groups are excluded from advertising campaigns, they may feel alienated or excluded from mainstream society. This has a detrimental impact not just on individuals but also on businesses that fail to engage with a varied spectrum of consumers. As a result, there has been a rising movement in the advertising sector for more diversity, with requests for more representation and accurate portrayal of marginalized groups (Albornoz, 2022).

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of advertisings showing LGBTQ+ people, thus reflecting a trend toward more inclusive and varied media portrayal. This tendency can be ascribed to a rising understanding of the value of tolerance and diversity in society, as well as the growing acceptance of queer rights (Fried and Oprea, 2023). While some may argue that marketers are simply using LGBTQ+ inclusion as a strategic tactic to appeal to a specific market segment, it is critical to recognize the potential positive impact that such advertising can have on LGBTQ+ people (Eisend and Hermann, 2019). Advertising that features LGBTQ+ persons in mainstream media can assist to normalize their existence and enhance public acceptance and understanding. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising can also serve as a form of activism, advocating for equal rights and challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. By taking a stand and featuring LGBTQ+ individuals in their advertising, companies can signal their support for the queer community and promote a message of inclusion and acceptance (Fried and Oprea, 2023).

Prior studies have highlighted two elements that influence viewers' opinions towards LGBTQ+ inclusive content: the specific subgroup of the LGBTQ+ population depicted and the degree of importance of the LGBTQ+ characters in the story (Eisend and Hermann, 2019). Despite the fact that the phrase "gay population" is commonly used to refer to the whole LGBTQ+ community, it is critical to recognize the distinct experiences and types of oppression encountered by different subgroups within the community. This includes the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people in advertising. Lesbian women have historically been underrepresented in advertising as compared to homosexual males, and, when they are included, they are frequently depicted in a hypersexualized manner intended to appeal to heterosexual male audiences (Nölke, 2017; Um, 2016). Although depictions of hypersexualized lesbian women may elicit positive responses from heterosexual male viewers, the general audience is more accustomed to encountering gay male characters in media, resulting in different judgements of gay and lesbian character portrayals (Eisend and Hermann, 2019).

Additionally, Eliason (2016) found that lesbians and homosexual men might describe themselves differently, with gender identification potentially having a larger role for lesbians than for gay males. This gap may be attributed to lesbians enduring social double jeopardy, in which they encounter obstacles based on both their gender and sexuality, whereas gay males experience just challenges based on their sexuality. The experience of being homosexual may vary between gay men and lesbians, as male sexual identity has often been linked to sexual activities, while lesbian identity tends to have a stronger political and emotional dimension. Marketers targeting both gay and lesbian consumers with ads that predominantly feature same-sex couples may mistakenly assume that both groups primarily identify with their sexual identity rather than their gender identity, and that both genders share a similar homosexual identity (Oakenfull et al., 2008). As a result of heterosexual individuals' possible negative reactions towards explicit LGBTQ+ persons in commercials, the concept of gay window advertising was created (Um, 2016).

This concept refers to a method of advertising that incorporates various LGBTQ+ hints or iconography that can easily be noticed by the minority, without the straight consumers remarking anything related to the queer community. To appeal to LGBTQ+ customers without alerting homophobic audiences, the marketing strategy known as "gay window advertising" depicts persons of the same sex in a way that is purposely ambiguous about their sexual orientation (Borgerson et al., 2006). This tactic has the potential to be extended to target straight customers as well, using indirect persuasion techniques such as metaphorical statements given in ad visuals. McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) feel that indirect assertions given through metaphor are beneficial because they make customers more susceptible to many favorable inferences about the brand being sold.

The use of indirect persuasion tactics in advertising imagery is increasing, and employing metaphorical statements in gay window advertising can lead to multiple interpretations or subtle implications. This ambiguity may provide a persuasive advantage, allowing the ad to appeal to diverse audiences while avoiding overt messaging. Overall, the use of figurative language in advertising can encourage customers to draw more connections, ultimately increasing the likelihood of persuading them to purchase the advertised product or service. However, for some LGBTQ+ people, the idea of gay window advertising may look like a compromise (Gong, 2020) and be perceived as just another marketing strategy employed by advertisers to increase their sales.

Including LGBTQ+ people in marketing and media images has a substantial influence on their sense of social acceptability, which can lead to enhanced brand loyalty within this population (Kates, 1999). The sense of validation and recognition that comes from seeing oneself represented in advertising may elicit favorable emotions and strengthen a sense of belonging, ultimately leading to a stronger affinity for the brand or company that provides such representation (Eisend and Hermann, 2019). This may also foster consumer loyalty if they believe a brand recognizes their identity and actively supports it, causing them to favor that brand over others. As Pullen (2014) argues, while young people, presumably born to heterosexual parents, begin to recognize and identify as queer, they may lack inherent support or educational resources, as well as visible queer role models. As they negotiate their new identity, they may feel alone and insecure.

Furthermore, a culture that values heterosexuality and traditional gender roles may discourage these individuals from expressing their newfound self-awareness, whether explicitly or implicitly. This may lead to a lack of understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, accentuating the difficulties that these individuals encounter.

Thus, the advertising industry plays an important role for this minority group, especially for Gen Z and the next generations who can encounter greater representation in mainstream media from a young age, normalizing the differences based on sexual orientation and preferences.

According to Suzanne Walters' research (2001) on LGBTQ+ visibility in the United States, individuals who identify as queer are often raised by people who do not share their identity, leading to an underdeveloped sense of self. As a result, queer individuals must actively seek to create their own identities and communities. Similarly, Joseph Goodwin (1989), in his study of queer acculturation, notes that the hidden nature of the LGBT community means that traditional institutions like families, churches, schools, and social groups, which typically support cultural integration, are often absent. Consequently, gay individuals must primarily rely on each other to acquire the skills necessary to navigate and thrive within the LGBT+ community. Accordingly, when the platform YouTube began to gain popularity and the concept of 'vlogger' appeared, queer people started sharing their coming out stories, their lives growing up and how they faced any hardships they had to battle with. For example, the well-known singer Troye Sivan did a coming-out video in 2013, where he nervously explained that his different sexual orientation should not have any influence whatsoever on people's perception about him, professionally or personally. In addition, he mentions other people that created the same kind of content before him and declaring that they had a very positive impact on him, making him feel more understood (Sivan, 2013). However, obtaining a platform and a large number of followers is not always an easy task, and this is the case for Nikkie Tutorials (Nikkie de Jager), a famous YouTube make-up artist, who was blackmailed in exchange for keeping secret her gender identity. Consequently, she posted a video where she explained the whole story, while coming out as transgender, concluding that everyone should be proud of being part of the LGBTQ+ community and of their journey (de Jager, 2020).

Even though big corporations, such as Nike, Adidas, United Colors of Benetton and Fossil may use queer-themed products, especially during Pride Month, as a marketing strategy to attract LGBTQ+ customers, concept known as rainbow washing (Rodríguez, 2022), their actions are still important, as they raise awareness and visibility. Furthermore, they also donate parts of their campaign sales to NGOs that fight for equality.

For example, in 2020, ASOS collaborated with GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) for their Pride collection, after which they donated 100% of their net sales to them “in support of its mission to promote accurate LGBTQ+ representation in the media” (Sloan, 2020).

In 2019, a Gallup poll of US citizens found that 53% of Americans supported legislation to establish “new civil rights laws to reduce discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people” (Equality Act, 2019), indicating an increasing level of acceptance of gays and lesbians. This pattern suggests that gay consumers, along with straight consumers, may be targeted in a universal mainstream media campaign. Despite ongoing boycott threats from anti-gay organizations, brands that have unequivocally acknowledged the LGBTQ+ experience in their advertising messages have received significant and vocal support from both the queer community and the growing population that supports LGBTQ+ rights, resulting in significant social and economic benefits (Han and Tsai, 2015).

Inclusive advertising can minimize the prominence and distinctiveness of minority images, while simultaneously targeting both majority and minority consumers within the same advertisement. This approach allows marketers to capitalize on the advantages of global campaigns and mainstream media, all while maintaining the loyalty of minority customers without alienating the majority audience (Bhat et al., 1998). Additionally, this approach portrays minorities within the framework of a multicultural society, empowering and affirming those who seek to integrate into mainstream culture. Recognizing the significance of such inclusive strategies can be particularly beneficial for developing advertising tactics that align with the evolving socio-political landscape of today (Han and Tsai, 2015). Cunningham and Melton (2014) conducted sport marketing research to investigate the effects of LGBTQ-inclusive tactics in a company's advertising strategy. According to the findings, implementing these strategies not only showed the organization as minority-friendly and diversified, but also had no detrimental influence on heterosexual males, who often have unfavorable responses regarding sexual minorities. This conclusion is crucial because it implies that inclusive advertising has the potential to minimize the detrimental non-target effect.

Hence, the advertising industry is changing dramatically as people become more aware of the value of diversity and inclusion in society. Brands that take steps to make their advertising more inclusive and representative of society have a more beneficial impact on society and inspire change. While the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in advertising is increasing, it is critical to recognize the different experiences and types of discrimination that different subgroups within the community face. The employment of indirect persuasion strategies, such as gay window advertising, can be beneficial, although the LGBTQ+ community may regard it as a compromise. Inclusion of marginalized groups in advertising campaigns not only normalizes their presence, but also promotes equal rights and confronts discriminatory attitudes and practices.

Methodology

In the following section of the article, we aim to identify some of the key characteristics of how LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed in advertising.

To achieve this, we conducted a content analysis of Cannes Lions-winning advertisements from a five-year period, spanning 2020 to 2024.

We analyzed the grand prix and gold medal winners for six categories of the festival: film, outdoor, film craft, entertainment, good, health. We chose these categories, on the one hand because of the storytelling

dimension and visibility (film, film craft, outdoor, entertainment) and, on the other hand, because of the increased probability of addressing our topic of interest (good and health).

We focused on Cannes Lions-winning advertisements for this research due to the festival's prestigious reputation as a benchmark for creativity and excellence in advertising. Cannes Lions-winning campaigns often push the boundaries of traditional advertising by portraying emotional narratives that are socially relevant, thus becoming useful tools in the process of understanding the role and place of advertising in postmodern society.

Thus, we analyzed 163 advertisements that won Grand Prix and gold prizes at the Cannes Lions festival, and we selected from the winners those materials that portray LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

We identified 14 advertisements that contain LGBTQ+ representations. In our approach, we aimed to answer two main questions.

First, we wanted to see how are LGBTQ+ individuals portrayed in Cannes Lions-winning advertisements in terms of roles, relationships, and the presence of stereotypes.

Secondly, we sought to find out to what extent these ads incorporate activist messages related to LGBTQ+ advocacy, inclusivity, social justice, and anti-discrimination.

The coding framework for the analysis was divided into two main categories: one focused on LGBTQ+ representation and the other on the presence of activist messages. Each category included specific codes to facilitate a thorough examination of the advertisements.

The 'LGBTQ+ representation' category assessed:

- whether LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed as main characters or background characters;
- the portrayal of same-sex couples and families;
- whether the ads perpetuate or challenge stereotypes associated with LGBTQ+ individuals;
- the diversity of LGBTQ+ identities depicted, with an emphasis on intersectionality and inclusivity;
- the use of symbols commonly associated with LGBTQ+ culture and advocacy.

To evaluate the depth and diversity of representation, we also considered the specific LGBTQ+ identities portrayed in the ads, including gay men, lesbians, transgender individuals, non-binary people, and other identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

The 'activist messages' category examined the presence of activist themes in various forms and with differing tones.

Thus, we identified:

- explicit LGBTQ+ advocacy, in ads that directly advocate for LGBTQ+ rights;
- inclusivity and diversity in ads that promote inclusivity through their messaging;
- the inclusion of broader social justice topics, such as intersectionality and equality;
- ads that actively dismantle stereotypes associated with LGBTQ+ people;
- messages explicitly opposing discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity;
- corporate support in ads where brands express support for LGBTQ+ causes or engage in partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations.

The analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitatively, the frequency of each code was recorded to identify trends in LGBTQ+ representation and activist messaging across the sample. Qualitatively, detailed descriptions of each advertisement were examined to provide context and insight into how these themes were conveyed.

Results discussion

The analysis reveals a balance in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals, with eight instances as main characters and eight as background characters.

This suggests that while LGBTQ+ representation in Cannes Lions-winning ads is present, it remains somewhat limited in visibility. Although more than half of the ads feature LGBTQ+ individuals in prominent roles, their equal presence as background characters indicates that their inclusion often serves a supporting role rather than taking the spotlight.

The presence of same-sex couples and families in a relatively low number (six instances) suggests that advertising industry may still be hesitant to fully explore LGBTQ+ family life, possibly reflecting lingering cultural taboos or marketing caution in global or conservative markets. On a more positive note, nine ads featured a diverse range of LGBTQ+ identities, encompassing various gender identities and sexual orientations. The representation of gay men (three ads), lesbians (three ads), trans women (six ads), and trans men (two ads) suggests that brands are striving for more intersectional and inclusive portrayals, reflecting the broader spectrum of the LGBTQ+ community.

The limited use of symbols, like the rainbow flag, appearing in only two ads, could indicate a shift away from overt signaling toward more integrated, narrative-based representation. Rather than relying on overt LGBTQ+ symbols, ads may be focusing on subtler, more nuanced portrayals of LGBTQ+ life.

Regarding the presence of activist messages, we identified seven ads that explicitly advocated for LGBTQ+ rights and eleven that focused on themes of inclusivity. This suggests that while brands are becoming more comfortable promoting LGBTQ+ rights and inclusivity, these topics are not yet predominant in a significant portion of successful advertisements. Brands are selectively choosing when to take a clear stance on LGBTQ+ issues, possibly balancing advocacy with market considerations. Additionally, the presence of social justice themes in six ads indicates an acknowledgment of broader societal issues, often linked to LGBTQ+ rights.

The higher number of ads promoting anti-discrimination messages (eleven ads) indicates that many brands are going beyond basic representation. While this shift may not fully address deeper issues, it reflects an effort to engage with important social themes. Moreover, the substantial presence of corporate support (eleven ads) indicates that brands are increasingly seeing LGBTQ+ advocacy as part of their corporate responsibility. This includes public statements of support and partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations, signaling that brands recognize the importance of aligning with social causes to enhance their brand identity and consumer loyalty.

Conclusion

The portrayal and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the advertising industry have evolved dramatically over the years. Advertisers, brands, and agencies have increasingly recognized the importance of authentically representing LGBTQ+ narratives and identities, as society has become more attuned to the

value of diversity and equitable representation. This shift reflects a broader cultural transformation, where inclusivity starts to be more than just a trend, but a major expectation from consumers. Brands are now more aware that engaging with LGBTQ+ audiences go beyond superficial representation; it requires a deep understanding of the community's experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

The results of the analysis carried out in the last part of the article indicate that while LGBTQ+ representation and activist messaging are present in Cannes Lions-winning ads, they are not yet fully integrated. Brands seem to be testing the waters with representation of LGBTQ+ individuals, often opting for more inclusive portrayals without overtly dismantling stereotypes or featuring activist messaging in all cases.

Although it is a relevant topic, the percentage of ads containing LGBTQ+ representation is still only 8.6% of the 163 ads we analyzed. This suggests that some campaigns prefer to reflect LGBTQ+ identities in a more neutral or traditional light, without pushing boundaries or challenging societal norms. This approach could be seen as a way to include diverse representation without appearing to preach or to alienate consumers, allowing brands to connect with wider audiences while still acknowledging LGBTQ+ communities.

An interesting aspect that was underlined in our investigation is that while in 2024 there was only two advertisements that included LGBTQ+ representations, a major topic that was present in several examples was sustainability and climate crisis. Once again, we can see the dynamic focus on current socio-political issues within the advertising industry. Brands tend to prioritize hot topics that resonate with both consumers and global concerns at a given moment. Moreover, while this focus on climate and sustainability is important, it could also indicate that LGBTQ+ representation may be seen as less pressing in times when other global issues take center stage. The change of focus can suggest the risk of issue fatigue where brands cycle through social causes without maintaining consistent advocacy across multiple important areas, such as LGBTQ+ rights and climate justice. It remains to be established whether this is a long-term trend or was the result of transitory factors. Regardless, this observation raises questions about whether brands are genuinely committed to long-term advocacy or simply following trends to stay relevant, a crucial aspect of the discussion on brand activism.

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