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TOKENISM OR INCLUSION?

SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES BETWEEN “US” AND “THEM” IN THE POLISH QUEER COMMUNITY’S RECEPTION OF LGBT+ ADS

INTRODUCTION

The media representation of LGBT+ individuals can serve as an arena for the renegotiation of social boundaries. Previous studies have shown that diversity-based marketing (mainly concerning multiculturalism) has the potential to foster positive perceptions of members of out-groups as well as brands employing such strategies (Johnson, Elliott, Grier 2010; Cunningham, Melton 2014; Dimitrieska, Stamevska, Stankovska 2019). Nevertheless, in the past, researchers and practitioners in the field of LGBT+ advertising have expressed doubts about introducing inclusive images to mainstream audiences (Bhat, Leigh, Wardlow 1996; Angelini, Bradley 2010). Predicting negative reactions from heterosexual audiences was considered a significant challenge for advertisers, a concern often explained through the lens of Social Identity Theory. This concept suggests that individuals constantly strive to favor their own group while assigning negative traits to the “Other” (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel, Turner, 1986; Turner et al. 1987). Based on this theory, it can be argued that homosexual consumers exposed to advertisements featuring homosexual representation experience favoritism toward their own social group, leading to a more positive reception of the message and an increase in its

persuasive power (Eisend, Hermann 2019: 383). Similarly, heterosexual individuals should prefer messages featuring representations of their own social group (Bhat, Leigh, Wardlow 1996; Hooten, Noeva, Hammonds 2009; Angelini, Bradley 2010). However, later studies have demonstrated that the reception of advertisements is influenced not only by group membership but also by a range of psychological factors, including personal values, openness to diversity, and prior exposure to inclusive content (Oakenfull, McCarthy, Greenlee 2008; Um 2016; Bhat, Leigh, Wardlow 1996; Eisend, Hermann 2019; Kim et al. 2013). This indicates that audience reactions to LGBT+ advertisements are shaped by more complex mechanisms than initially assumed.

Although LGBT+ advertisements are now widespread, in some conservative countries (including Poland) they are still perceived as controversial or revolutionary, prompting debate about cultural values and norms. Poland ranks 39th in ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Index and is second-to-last among European Union Member States. Although the legal situation of LGBT+ people in Poland has remained unchanged for years, their social situation has worsened, particularly between 2019 and 2021. This was largely a result of public figures portraying them as a threat to family values, the Catholic faith, and public order.

There has been limited research examining LGBT+ advertising in the unique socio-political context of Central and Eastern Europe, where cultural norms and political discourses around LGBT+ rights remain deeply polarized. This raises questions about potential cultural differences in the reception of such content—not only between heteronormative audiences, but also within the target group itself. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for advancing theoretical insights into the intersection of media and identity, but also for informing inclusive marketing practices in culturally polarized settings.

In light of this, the aim of this article is to analyze the emotional and cognitive reactions of members of the Polish queer community to advertisements featuring their group, integrating Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel, Turner 1986) and Lamont's concept of symbolic boundaries (which refers to the distinctions that individuals and groups draw to categorize themselves and others, shaping notions of belonging and exclusion) (Lamont, Molnár 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass, Pachucki 2015). To address these gaps in the literature and examine the unique dynamics in Poland, this study investigates the following questions:

Q1: What are the participants' opinions on LGBT+ media representation and LGBT+ representation in advertising?

Q2: What needs regarding representation and representation in advertising do the participants express?

Q3: What emotional reactions do the participants have to the general discussion of LGBT+ themes in advertising and their exposure to LGBT+ advertisements?

The author conducted two focus group interviews with a total of 13 participants. Data analysis was conducted in line with the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2000, 2006; Keller, Charmaz 2016), employing an iterative and flexible process of coding and categorization, where analytical categories emerged directly from the data through constant comparison and interpretation within the studied narratives. The use of the focus group method enabled access to the opinions, emotions, and reactions of individuals belonging to a marginalized group that is generally challenging for researchers. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' shared experiences, the dynamics of group interactions, and the ways in which collective and individual perspectives intersect, revealing deeper layers of meaning embedded in their narratives (Barbour 2011; Liamputtong 2015; Morgan 2021).

"US" AND "THEM": AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND LAMONT'S SOCIAL BOUNDARIES THEORY

The concepts of social identity and symbolic boundaries are integral to understanding how individuals and groups negotiate their place within a society. This is especially important when discussing relationships between the majority and the multiple minorities fighting for a way to belong or to be seen. Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner, posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel, Turner 1986). This process involves three key stages: categorization, identification, and comparison. Individuals distinguish between the in-group (us) and the out-group (them) and form a significant bond with the category they identify with (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel, Turner 1986; Turner et al. 1987). A person strives for their own group to be seen as superior, while other groups are devalued. As noted earlier, this theory has been used by several researchers to explain the positive and negative effects of LGBT+ advertisements (Bhat, Leigh, Wardlow 1996; Hooten, Noeva, Hammonds 2009; Angelini, Bradley 2010). Although membership in the represented group can influence the evaluation of an ad, numerous sociological, psychological, and cultural perspectives can also explain these reactions.

For a deeper analysis, adopting an additional theoretical perspective that provides a further layer of interpretation is useful. Lamont's symbolic boundaries theory, similar to Social Identity Theory, converges on the importance of "the dynamics of 'us' versus 'them'," but the two operate at different levels (Lamont, Molnár 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass, Pachucki 2015). Lamont's theory examines the cultural and social distinctions that groups create to define themselves and exclude others. Symbolic boundaries are drawn through shared norms, values, and practices, forming the foundation for tangible social boundaries such as class- or identity-based divisions. The concept of symbolic boundaries has been widely utilized in various research traditions to understand how distinctions between groups are constructed and maintained. Scholars from diverse fields have adopted this concept to examine cultural practices, power dynamics, and social identities. For example, Bourdieu (2010) explored symbolic boundaries in the context of cultural capital and social stratification. In his work, symbolic boundaries are seen as tools that groups use to assert dominance and maintain their status by legitimizing specific tastes, behaviors, and cultural practices. Bourdieu's analysis highlights how these boundaries reinforce inequalities and ensure the reproduction of social hierarchies through subtle but effective mechanisms of distinction (Bourdieu 2010; Lamont 2010, 2012). Similarly, Hall (1997) applied the idea of boundaries in his work on cultural studies, particularly in understanding identity and representation. He argued that media representations, such as advertising, often reinforce these boundaries by constructing stereotypical images of "the other," which serve to exclude marginalized groups while privileging dominant ones. Hall's insights are particularly relevant in exploring how LGBT+ individuals are represented in advertisements and how these representations challenge or perpetuate social norms.

INCLUSIVE ADVERTISING AS A TOOL FOR BREAKING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

In recent years, marketing has witnessed a new trend based on the belief that products and campaigns should target all consumers regardless of their demographic, physical, or psychographic characteristics (Dimitrieska, Stamevska, Stankovska 2019; Cunningham, Melton 2014). Diversity and inclusive marketing are based on the idea of incorporating and representing a wide spectrum of groups and identities. Organizations use the image of diversity and inclusivity in external communication

(primarily in advertising) to attract new customers or employees (Cunningham, Melton 2014). The effectiveness of diversity-based approaches comes from two key factors: similarity and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Similarity (for example, in terms of race or culture) positively influences the ability to relate to an actor, leading to identification and internalization. Another significant aspect is CSR, which consumers associate with the advertising and, subsequently, the entire brand. Johnson, Elliott, Grier (2010) confirmed that exposure to multicultural advertisements generates positive brand beliefs about the companies producing such advertisements. This process is significantly strengthened by a brand being perceived as “socially responsible” and by identification with the brand based on this belief. Another factor in this process is the feeling of “being the target.” Research has shown that similarities between the viewer and the actor create a sense in the audience that they are the intended target of the message (Aaker, Brumbaugh, Grier 2000; Grier, Brumbaugh, Thornton 2006). Marginalized groups targeted by marketers gain legitimacy in the marketplace. Being the subject of advertisers’ interest may be perceived as a “success” in terms of the significance and value of their group (Johnson, Elliott, Grier 2010).

Diversity-based strategies can be useful not only for corporations but also for minorities, as they assist in the process of intentionally crossing or redefining symbolic boundaries to include groups traditionally marginalized. As Lamont’s concept explains, these boundaries help define and maintain group identities by delineating who belongs and who does not. Inclusive advertising has the potential to challenge and expand these boundaries by showcasing diverse identities as part of the mainstream. Inclusive approaches focus on blurring the lines between “us” and “them” by including characters from different communities while not excluding the majority. Exposure to inclusive advertisements may, in the long term, affect attitudes toward marginalized individuals through cognitive and affective impacts on their audiences (Åkestam, Rosengren, Dahlen 2017; Gerbner 1967, 1998; Gerbner, Gross 1976). This hypothesis has been empirically confirmed by researchers in the context of queer advertisements. Narratives about LGBT+ individuals can guide the audience to reflect on other people and their characteristics (for example, being homosexual, being in love) in the context of their own experiences (Åkestam, Rosengren, Dahlen 2017: 85). In doing so, they may lead to changes in self-categorization and foster feelings of empathy and a sense of solidarity toward LGBT+ individuals. This aligns with social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from

their membership in social groups. By presenting marginalized identities in relatable narratives, inclusive advertising can encourage audiences to expand their in-group perceptions, fostering a stronger sense of shared humanity and reducing intergroup biases.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using focus group interviews, a qualitative method of collecting data through moderated group discussions (Barbour 2011; Liamputtong 2015). This approach provides insight into participants' opinions, emotions, and ways of interpreting a given issue, particularly among those belonging to communities with limited social visibility (Kitzinger 2005; Liamputtong 2015). The research comprised two focus groups (with 7 and 6 participants). Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, a form of purposeful sampling usually used to gain access to vulnerable, hard-to-reach groups (Naderifar, Goli, Ghaljaei 2017). Selection criteria included a variety of sexual orientations (for example, bisexual, asexual, homosexual, and pansexual) and gender identities (cisgender, transgender, non-binary, and agender). Due to recruitment challenges for participants older than 30, the study focused on individuals aged 19–30. The interview script consisted of open-ended questions and the presentation of advertising materials to analyze the reception of LGBT+ messages. The discussion was supplemented by a written exercise, allowing participants to express individual opinions.

The data collected during the focus group interviews were analyzed using Constructivist Grounded Theory, as developed by Charmaz (2000, 2006). This method emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants, recognizing that the researcher's interpretations are shaped by their perspective and context. Constructivist Grounded Theory is particularly suitable for exploring social phenomena, as it focuses on uncovering processes and meanings rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. Analysis began with the transcription of the recorded focus group discussions. Following the principles of grounded theory, coding categories were not predefined but rather emerged from the data. Initial coding involved line-by-line analysis of the transcripts to identify specific themes and patterns. This stage produced detailed, descriptive codes that captured participants' language and perspectives as closely as possible. A process of focused coding was then applied, during which the initial codes were grouped into broader, more analytical categories. This iterative approach allowed for the constant comparison of data within and

between transcripts to refine the emerging themes (Charmaz 2006). The categories were further conceptualized to develop a theoretical framework reflecting the participants' experiences and perceptions.

LGBT+ REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING AS PERCEIVED BY THE POLISH QUEER COMMUNITY

The discussions clearly revealed that representation of the participants' sexual and gender identities in media and culture holds great significance for them on many levels. Their statements frequently included evaluative expressions such as "*very important*," "*quite important*," "*I really appreciate it*," and "*It [representation] matters a lot to me*." They also explicitly described the gratification derived from consuming such content. Some participants even admitted to being willing to bear additional costs, such as learning a language, to access content featuring queer people. The importance of LGBT+ representation in the media for the respondents is further underscored by the personal stories they shared about their determined search for this type of content:

P8: *I was searching very hard—I don't know—for movies, series, books, but also people in my community. And since there weren't many, I looked very hard and persistently because I really cared about immersing myself in this topic*¹.

P6: *I was simply fed up with reading about heterosexual romances and started looking for books with non-hetero themes. They are much easier, better, and more enjoyable for me to read*².

While the respondents' opinions about LGBT+ representation in the media were overwhelmingly positive, questions about representation in advertising were met with less enthusiasm. Although a significant share of them still considered it necessary, they nonetheless approached the topic with greater caution and uncertainty. A stark contrast between attitudes toward representation in the media (in general) and in advertising became evident in the following excerpt from a group discussion:

When I see an LGBT+ character on screen, I feel...

P13: *Maybe I feel visible and not alone.*

¹ Originally: "bardzo mocno szukałam, nie wiem, filmów, seriali, książek, ale też osób jakoś w moim otoczeniu, a że ich nie było dużo, to szukałam bardzo mocno i zawzięcie i mi bardzo zależało, żeby po prostu się jakoś otaczać tym tematem".

² Originally: "po prostu mam dosyć czytania o heteroromansach i zaczęłam sobie szukać właśnie różnych książek z wątkami niehetero i dużo łatwiej, lepiej i przyjemniej mi się to czyta".

P12: *I wanted to say that I feel pride in a way.*

P8: *I'd say the same as was said earlier—a sense of belonging, but also a kind of satisfaction that, despite everything, it's being shown.*

When I see an LGBT+ character in an advertisement, I feel...

P9: *I feel anxiety because advertisements are often based on stereotypes, and that's not what I want the LGBT+ community to be associated with.*

P8: *Honestly, I agree—there's anxiety because an ad is supposed to present a product in a good light, so it's kind of exploiting minorities just to make money³.*

Completing the sentence “When I see an LGBT+ character on screen, I feel...” elicited only positive reactions (even though the phrase “on screen” could also apply to advertising). However, changing the sentence to “When I see an LGBT+ character in an advertisement, I feel...” produced a distinctly different effect. Responses in the first group showed less contrast, but introducing this topic still led to greater hesitation and uncertainty. Participants became visibly more tense and struggled to articulate their thoughts. They admitted to feelings of surprise and even shock upon seeing such portrayals on the Polish market.

“ARE THESE ADS REALLY FOR US?” EXTERNAL FUNCTIONS OF REPRESENTATION

The analysis revealed three key categories of gratification provided by LGBT+ representation in media: as glasses (a source of self-awareness), as a mirror (a means of identification), and as a remedy (a source of emotional support and self-esteem reinforcement). However, participants noted that these needs were not fully met in advertising. Instead, they viewed advertisements as serving external functions, primarily normalization and education:

³ Originally: Kiedy widzę na ekranie postać LGBT+ czuję...

U13: To może czuję się widoczna i nie samotna.

U12: Chciałam powiedzieć, że czuję dumę w pewnym sensie.

U8: Powiedziałbym, że tak samo jak wcześniej było powiedziane, takie poczucie i przynależności, ale też pewnej satysfakcji, że jednak pomimo wszystkiego i tak się to jakby pokazuje.

Kiedy widzę postać LGBT+ w reklamie czuję...

U9: Ja osobiście czuję wtedy niepokój, bo reklamy często bywają bazowane na stereotypach, a stereotyp to nie jest to z czym ja bym chciał, żeby społeczność LGBT była kojarzona.

U8: Szczerze, zgadzam się też, że niepokój, bo jednak reklama ma za zadanie jakby pokazanie produktu w dobrym świetle, więc to jest w pewnym sensie wykorzystanie mniejszości, żeby po prostu zdobyć pieniądze.

P2: [...] *the commercial ones are more about normalizing for society, so that heteronormative people see such an ad and it becomes normalized*⁴.

P5: [...] *showing the realities of LGBT+ people on a broader scale, so that people can see it's not just some textbook thing, like us going to parades or something. It's that we have our own stories, our lives, what we've been through, and that we keep going, something like that*⁵.

The normalizing function was seen as increasing societal acceptance of LGBT+ individuals by integrating them into mainstream narratives. The educational function was associated with raising awareness about LGBT+ identities and the challenges they face, as well as modeling appropriate social behaviors. Participants acknowledged that advertising is not a medium they actively seek for personal gratification but recognized its potential to reach a broad audience, including those who might not otherwise engage with LGBT+ issues.

Despite their stated skepticism about advertisements fulfilling these functions, some ads elicited positive emotional reactions, such as pride and satisfaction, and partially fulfilled the identified gratifications. This suggests that advertising, while not an ideal medium for meeting internal needs, can still play a meaningful role in shaping societal perceptions and contributing to the visibility and acceptance of LGBT+ communities.

“WE DON’T WANT TO BE A TARGET”: THE FEAR OF STIGMATIZATION

Commercial efforts by companies to support LGBT+ individuals were met with significant caution and suspicion in both focus groups. This stemmed primarily from participants’ perceptions of advertising as a form and their doubts about companies’ true intentions. Advertising evoked associations with stereotypical portrayals of social groups, which led to feelings of anxiety and fear of stereotypical or negative representation. This fear can also be understood as stemming from participants’ past experiences with media representations and the public discourse surrounding LGBT+ individuals in general. Participants frequently expressed concerns about the sincerity of messages, the actual values

⁴ Originally: [...] takie komercyjne są bardziej normalizujące dla społeczeństwa, że osoby heteronormatywne widzą taką reklamę i to się normalizuje. A jednak te społeczne są bardziej chyba w kierunku społeczności.

⁵ Originally: [...] pokazuje, jakie są realia osób LGBT właśnie na szerszą skalę, żeby właśnie widziały, że to nie jest tylko takie książkowe, że sobie chodzimy na jakieś parady, tylko że jednak mamy swoje historie, swoje życia, też swoje przeszłości i to jakby dalej żyjemy, coś w tym stylu.

upheld by companies, and the companies' lack of understanding or even ignorance about the LGBT+ community.

The effect of portraying being targeted not as favoritism of one's group, but as a form of exploitation, introduces something of a new dimension to research on inclusive and queer advertising. Felt targetedness, which refers to the perception that an advertisement is specifically directed at an individual or group, was previously perceived as a positive effect (Aaker, Brumbaugh, Grier 2000; Appiah 2001). Researchers suggested that when viewers perceive a similarity between themselves and the people depicted in an advertisement, the processes of identification and internalization are likely to take place (Aaker, Brumbaugh, Grier 2000; Appiah 2001). The stronger the perceived similarity, the more likely viewers are to identify with the ad and believe they are its intended audience. However, the findings of this study suggest that for young members of the Polish queer community, the perception of being targeted in LGBT+ advertisements was met with significant skepticism and discomfort. Instead of fostering a sense of inclusion, participants frequently described this felt targetedness as exploitative and insincere. This outcome could potentially be explained by three main hypotheses, which are yet to be tested:

- Felt targetedness may trigger negative emotional reactions due to recently widespread criticism of tokenism and the capitalization of minorities, particularly through practices like rainbow-washing.
- Felt targetedness may trigger negative emotional reactions due to the young age of the participants, which may carry generational significance, reflecting a generally anti-capitalist stance among members of Gen Z.
- Felt targetedness may trigger negative emotional reactions (or the reaction may be intensified) due to the Polish socio-political context, where LGBT+ rights remain highly contested. Felt targetedness, in this case, could be interpreted as a performative gesture rather than a meaningful attempt to bridge societal divides.

“WE ARE THE SAME”: THE NEED TO BELONG

One of the most important themes shaping the discussions was the contrast between normality and abnormality, the latter closely tied to stereotypization. The participants often used phrases like *“showing us as human beings,” “as a normal part of society,”* and *“an LGBT+ person is a normal human being.”* The words *“normal,” “normalization,”* and *“normality”* appeared regularly in both groups when they described the most desirable practices in inclusive advertising, for example:

Table 1

Negative perceptions of representation in advertising

| Perceptions of representation in advertising | Advertising as a source of stereotypical representation | Representation as a tool for generating profit | Representation as a token in times of political correctness |
|--|--|---|--|
| Themes | Advertising is inherently stereotypical and is not an appropriate form for showing representation; companies demonstrate ignorance or indifference toward the LGBT+ community. | Companies use LGBT+ individuals to achieve financial benefits; companies do not disclose their true values and beliefs, and their actions are insincere. | Companies use LGBT+ individuals to achieve non-financial benefits (e.g., generating controversy, meeting expectations of the liberal part of the audience); companies do not disclose their true values and beliefs, and their actions are insincere. |
| Example quotes from participant statements | <p><i>[...] because ads are often based on stereotypes, and a stereotype is not what I would want the LGBT+ community to be associated with^a.</i></p> <p><i>I don't know, advertising is such a short form that you can't address the topic properly, and many people in Poland need this topic to be addressed properly^b.</i></p> | <p><i>In a way, it's like the exploitation of minorities just to make money^c.</i></p> <p><i>It seems to me that it's more about commercially supporting people just because... it's profitable, let's put it that way^d.</i></p> | <p><i>If it's forced, like, I don't know, in some Netflix movies, just to be politically correct or to make something stand out, and it's unrealistic and ugh, it's gross^e.</i></p> <p><i>The creators give the character an actual personality, like the other characters, and don't treat them just as a necessary representation to placate the LGBT+ audience (in response to a question about what constitutes positive representation)^f.</i></p> |

^aOriginally: bo reklamy często bywają bazowane na stereotypach, a stereotyp to nie jest to z czym ja bym chciał, żeby społeczność LGBT była kojarzona.

^bOriginally: No i nie wiem, reklama to jest taka krótka forma, że tam nie da się poruszyć odpowiednio tego tematu, a wiele bardzo osób w Polsce potrzebuje, żeby ten temat został naprawdę solidnie poruszony.

^cOriginally: to jest w pewnym sensie wykorzystanie mniejszości, żeby po prostu zdobyć pieniądze.

^dOriginally: wydaje mi się, że to jest bardziej komercyjne wspieranie osób, żeby po prostu... Bo to się opłaca, że tak to nazwę.

^eOriginally: jeżeli to jest wciskane na siłę, tak jak nie wiem, do jakichś filmów netflixowych, tylko po to, żeby być poprawnym politycznie/żeby się wybiło coś bardziej i jest to takie nierealistyczne i fuj, to ble.

^fOriginally: twórcy dają jej faktycznie osobowość jak pozostałym postaciom, a nie traktują jedynie jako potrzebny dodatek reprezentacji dla udobruchania LGBT+ widowni.

Source: own research.

P4: *It was more like it was woven in as a normal part of society, as you could see there were different characters, so simply a part of society. It was showing us as human beings, and not isolating us as the LGBT community or anything like that. It's not a separate community, we're all people, regardless of whether we're heterosexual, or, like, lesbian, gay, bi—it's all the same. So, yes, I liked that⁶.*

P3: *I think it would be important to show this person's life, their loved ones or friends, their interests, to create a more "human" image, rather than one where the character's entire personality revolves around their identity⁷.*

In addition, most of the participants, in response to the question "If you were to imagine an advertisement that represents your identity positively, what would it look like?" pointed to depictions of LGBT+ individuals in everyday situations such as studying, working, and spending time with family and friends, which clearly served a normalizing function. This perception was also confirmed by their reaction after being exposed to advertisements featuring same-sex couples in their home environment:

P7: *It shows normalcy. People can have a very distant perception, not knowing someone at all, not wanting to get to know them, and here they see someone in their own comfort zone, in their typical life⁸.*

The data suggest that, despite the results of previous studies, the interview participants did not value favoritism of their in-group as much as the sense of belonging to the broader social structure. They strove to underline their similarities to the population as a whole, often emphasizing the fact that they are also human. It seemed as though they felt the need to humanize themselves to fit into society, as if their humanity were not an inherent part of their identity but something to be earned by conforming to social norms. They did not appear to want to be, or to be seen as, an "out-group" by the rest of society, attempting to break the symbolic boundaries between queer and non-queer identities.

This strong emphasis on "normality" may reflect a broader socio-political climate in Poland, where persistent public portrayals of LGBT+

⁶ Originally: to było tak wplecione jako normalna część społeczeństwa na podstawie, że widać było, że tam były różne postacie, to po prostu była część społeczeństwa, że pokazanie nas jako ludzi, a nie wyodrębnienie jako społeczność LGBT i coś w tym stylu. To nie jest oddzielna społeczność, tylko jakby jesteśmy wszyscy ludźmi, nieważne czy heteroseksualne, czy właśnie wszystko, jakby lesbijka, gej, bi to wszystko. Więc tak mi się podobało.

⁷ Originally: Myślę, że ważne byłoby ukazanie życia tej osoby, bliskich czy przyjaciół, jej zainteresowania, żeby stworzyć bardziej "ludzki" obraz, a nie taki, gdzie całą osobowością tej postaci jest jej tożsamość.

⁸ Originally: "To pokazuje normalność. Ludzie mogą sobie mieć takie wyobrażenie bardzo odległe, nie znając kogoś w ogóle, nie chcąc kogoś znać, a tutaj widzą kogoś w takim no jego zacisku, jego typowym życiu."

people as a threat to traditional values have made visibility potentially risky. In such a context, blending in with the majority and highlighting shared humanity may serve as a protective strategy against stigma.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore perceptions among the Polish queer community of LGBT+ representation in advertisements. The findings reveal a mixed response: while the importance of visibility of the LGBT+ community in the media is acknowledged, many respondents express discomfort with its commercialized portrayal in advertisements, which is not consistent with some previous studies (Johnson, Elliott, Grier 2010; Cunningham, Melton 2014; Dimitrieska, Stamevska, Stankovska 2019; Bhat, Leigh, Wardlow 1996; Angelini, Bradley 2010). The participants' views are strongly shaped by the fear of stereotyping, with many emphasizing that representation in ads is often seen as an attempt to exploit the community for financial or political gain. The analysis suggests that representation in advertisements does not solely contribute to social change or inclusion, but also risks reinforcing existing symbolic boundaries. The notion of "us" versus "them" is evident in the way queer individuals perceive their representation: it is either a form of inclusion or a marketing tool that risks further marginalizing them. This aligns with Social Identity Theory, which highlights the role of media in both constructing and maintaining social boundaries (Lamont, Molnár 2002; Tajfel, Turner 1986).

Furthermore, the study shows that authenticity is crucial in LGBT+ representation. Advertisements that lack genuine representation or that oversimplify complex identities are often met with criticism. The participants expressed a preference for more nuanced portrayals that reflect the diversity within the LGBT+ community rather than relying on stereotypical images. They also emphasized that advertisements should move beyond the performative aspects of inclusivity, showing true commitment to social change. The sociopolitical context in Poland may prompt LGBT individuals to adopt strategies of blending in and conforming to societal norms rather than standing out, due to anticipated stigmatization and prevailing social expectations. This tendency can be better understood in light of the deterioration of the community's social situation between 2019 and 2021, when public figures frequently framed LGBT+ identities as a threat to family values, religion, and public order. In such an environment, participants' reluctance toward overtly targeted

LGBT+ advertising and their preference for depictions of “normality” can be seen as adaptive responses to a hostile climate.

The study is not without its limitations, such as its focus on a specific age group (19–30 years old), which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should broaden the scope to include a wider demographic of the LGBT+ community. The study lacks representation from older LGBT+ individuals, whose experiences may differ due to historical and social contexts, as well as the absence of participants from rural areas, where acceptance levels and access to queer content might vary. Additionally, the research does not account for socioeconomic diversity, gender-based differences, or intersectional experiences (for example, ethnicity, religion, or educational level), which could influence perceptions of representation. Despite these limitations, the study’s findings offer valuable and novel insights into the perceptions of LGBT+ representation in advertising within a sociopolitically polarized context. They provide a strong foundation for future research on LGBT+ advertising and marketing in countries with similar cultural and political dynamics, highlighting the need for more inclusive and nuanced approaches to representation.

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Abstract

LGBT+ representation in advertising elicits diverse reactions, influenced by social identity, cultural norms, and individual beliefs. In Poland, where LGBT+ rights remain a contested issue, such portrayals can generate both acceptance and resistance. This study examines how members of the Polish queer community respond to LGBT+ advertisements, using Social Identity Theory and symbolic boundaries as analytical frameworks. Based on focus group interviews with 13 participants, the findings reveal tensions between the need for authentic representation and concerns about tokenism and corporate motives. Applying Constructivist Grounded Theory, the study highlights how queer individuals navigate these portrayals, offering insights into media, identity, and inclusive marketing in polarized societies.

keywords: symbolic boundaries, inclusive marketing, tokenism, LGBT+, advertisement

słowa kluczowe: granice symboliczne, marketing inkluzywny, tokenizm, LGBT+, reklama