



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Effective Advertising to the Lgbtq Communities: an Exploratory Study**

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This research examines advertising professionals' perceptions of best practices for advertising to the LGBTQ market. 33 in-depth interviews were conducted with LGBTQ advertising and communication professionals. Textual analysis suggests the importance of inclusive authentic advertising, which is encompassed by nuanced representation, intentional visibility efforts, and universal messaging.

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# Ads, Advocates, and Allies in Navigating the Road from Marginalization to Legitimation

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## **Paper #1: The Ally Effect: The Role of Implicit and Explicit Cues in Advertising Towards Marginalized Groups**

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## **Paper #2: Sincere, Not Sinful: The Unique Role of Brand Personality in Shaping Liberals' and Conservatives' Views of LGBT Ads**

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## **Paper #3: When Consensus Is Lost: Mobilizing Capital to Establish Consumer Legitimacy**

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## **Paper #4: Effective Advertising to the LGBTQ Communities: An Exploratory Study**

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### **SESSION OVERVIEW**

This session investigates how marginalized consumer groups gain legitimacy through marketing and consumption, with a special focus on the LGBTQ+ community. The papers approach this question using a variety of methodologies and a diverse range of samples, including LGBTQ+ communities, allies, and marketing professionals. Understanding the legitimization of marginalized groups is of increasing importance to society in general and marketing specifically (Argo and Main 2008; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Walters and Moore 2002). As concepts of gender and sexual identity become more fluid, traditional categorizations and conceptualizations of marginalized consumers begin to erode. This demands a more nuanced understanding of these groups and how they themselves navigate these changes. More favorable representations serve as a means of facilitating inclusion and representation. This session will explore the many ways that legitimization of the LGBTQ+ community can be facilitated through marketing and consumption.

The first paper investigates how LGBTQ allies (vs. non-allies) respond to ads with either explicit or implicit signals of LGBTQ+ support, and under what conditions allies respond less favorably. The authors find that allies respond more favorably to explicit signals, in turn increasing purchase intentions and positive word of mouth intentions. This research also addresses the important literature gap on attitudes toward bisexual representation. The second paper explores the role of brand personality in how liberals and conservatives respond to same-sex couples in advertising. Results show that conservatives respond negatively to same-sex couples in ads because they view the ad as low in brand sincerity. Negative evaluations are attenuated when the ad is for an exciting brand. Archival analysis shows the benefits of LGBTQ+ representation by sincere brands. The third paper explores how same-sex couples navigate issues of legitimacy in the context of same-sex weddings, which challenge traditional gender dichotomies. Depth interviews and ethnographic observation reveal that consumers cultivate new forms of cultural capital around redefining gender in this traditional space where their tastes

and preferences are not recognized or legitimized. Further, consumers' own moral judgements complicate their ability to reimagine gender enactments. Finally, the fourth paper reports in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ advertising and communication professionals (brand managers, directors, consultants, CEOs, etc.), offering insights into best practices for LGBTQ+ advertising. Results emphasize the importance of authentic messaging through more nuanced and complex representations of sexual and gender minorities, intentional visibility efforts in light of a history of erasure, and producing universal messaging that resonates regardless of gender or sexual identity.

These papers address the challenges consumers and marketers face when attempting to legitimize marginalized consumers. Themes of more expansive inclusion and representation emerge across papers. Collectively, the papers prompt multiple questions for discussion: 1) What is the role of the marketplace in helping consumers establish legitimacy during times of societal change? 2) What can marketers do to ensure they legitimate consumers' evolving conceptions of gender and sexuality? 3) How can marginalized consumers best advocate for change? These papers that examine legitimacy in the same context should set the stage for a productive and impactful discussion.

## **The Ally Effect: The Role of Implicit and Explicit Cues in Advertising Towards Marginalized Groups**

### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Advertising research on marginalized groups often focuses on consumer reactions to in- and out-groups, putting forth the assertion that consumers will respond favorably to other members of their in-group, and less favorably to members of their out-group (Choi and Winterich 2013; White and Dahl 2007). Specifically, research on marginalized groups has shown that companies risk alienating the dominant group of "mainstream" consumers with explicit and sometimes implicit signals of marginalized group identity in ads (Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee 2008; Read, van Driel, and Potter 2018). However, the mainstream is not a homogenous group of consumers, and variation in how different mainstream (i.e., not marginalized) consumers respond to those implicit or explicit signals remains unexplored.

In general, companies are increasingly incorporating imagery and symbolism from marginalized groups in their advertisements, reflecting diversity in the marketplace involving not only sexual orientation, race, cultural, and immigration background. Thus, it is imperative to understand how marketing managers can incorporate diversity in their ads and increase the visibility and inclusion of the marginalized group without creating dissonance among mainstream consumers. One particular group in the mainstream that is likely to react positively to signals associated with a marginalized group is that of allies. Allies are those consumers that have high affect towards and are supportive of the group. They exist for many marginalized groups including straight and cisgender people who support the LGBTQ+ community, white supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, and neurotypical individuals who fight for the rights of individuals on the autism spectrum. In the present research, we address the following questions: 1) Do allies – those consumers with high affect towards the marginalized group – respond more favorably

to ads with explicit or implicit signals? and 2) Under which conditions do allies respond less favorably to such ads?

In two experimental studies, we test whether allies, or straight consumers high in affect for the LGBTQ+ community, respond differently to LGBTQ+ advertising signals than non-allies, or those low in affect for the community. Specifically, we examine ally and non-ally consumer responses to different types of LGBTQ+ signals (studies 1 and 2) and type of company support signals (study 2), within a framework of LGBTQ+ affect, perceptions of authenticity, attitudes toward the ad, and consumer outcomes (brand WOM and purchase intentions).

Study 1 tested whether and when straight consumers respond favorably towards an implicit versus an explicit LGBTQ+ signal depending on their level of positive affect towards the LGBTQ+ community. 195 heterosexual (straight) participants (50 % women 98/195, median age = 20 years) at a large Midwestern public university participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit. The study followed a 2 (signal: implicit vs. explicit) x continuous (affect) between-subjects design. Respondents were asked to review an ad by a fictitious company which portrayed a model with the gender-neutral name and her age. A pretest showed that the model in the ad could be perceived as either part of the LGBTQ+ community or not. We manipulated type of signal as follows. In the implicit signal condition, we overlaid the logo of the brand with the flag associated with the bi+ (pronounced “bi plus”) community. In contrast to the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag, this flag is less commonly known thus sending an implicit LGBTQ+ cue. In the explicit signal condition, we specifically stated that the model is bisexual. We measured LGBTQ+ affect, attitude towards the ad, purchase, and WOM intentions using existing scales. Results show that an explicit signal can be both beneficial and harmful for the brand depending on the type of consumer. Consumers who show affection towards the LGBTQ+ community, also referred to as allies, have more positive attitudes towards an ad with an explicit LGBTQ+ signal than when this signal is implicit. This change in attitudes translates into increases in purchase and WOM intentions. On the other hand, consumers who score low on LGBTQ+ affect perceive an explicit signal to be negative. We do not find any difference in perceptions based on LGBTQ+ affect when the signal is implicit.

Study 2 tested straight consumers respond favorably towards an implicit versus an explicit LGBTQ+ signal depending on how the company shows their support of the marginalized community. This study includes 307 heterosexual (straight) participants (50% women, median age = 21 year) at a large Midwestern public university who participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit. This study involves a 2 (signal explicit vs. control) x LGBTQ+ affect (continuous) x 3 (company LGBTQ+ support: Logo, Logo + Statement, Logo + CRM) between-subjects design. The LGBTQ+ support conditions included the Human Rights Campaign’s “Best Places to Work” logo, the logo and a statement of the company’s commitment to the LGBTQ+ community, and a CRM statement claiming 5% of sales would go to support the community. The same scales as study 1 were used as well as a perceived brand authenticity scale. Findings show that there are conditions under which consumers with high affect towards the marginalized group respond more favorably towards explicit signals (HRC logo condition) but also conditions under which consumers with low affect respond more favorably to explicit signals (CRM condition). The latter is an unexpected yet important finding, showing that marketers can even reach non-allies with explicit signals associated with a marginalized group.

Taken together, the present research finds that marketers can use explicit signals associated with a marginalized group without

risking favorable attitudes in the mainstream. Instead, explicit signals can even bolster the attitudes of allies, especially when the support of the marginalized group is authentic. The findings from this research have important implications for the acceptance of such ads in the mainstream media, allowing marketers to target a marginalized market without losing the mainstream market, thus helping with the inclusion of these consumers in the marketplace.

### Sincere, Not Sinful: The Unique Role of Brand Personality in Shaping Liberals’ and Conservatives’ Views of LGBT Ads

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

If a manager of a sincere brand hires an agency to create their next ad campaign, will the agency consider LGBTQ content to be consistent with the brand? Likewise, if they propose an ad with LGBTQ content, how will the brand manager respond? A 2015 Wells Fargo ad featured a lesbian couple who were learning sign language in anticipation of adopting a hearing-impaired girl. Some conservative consumers condemned the ad, while many others saw the ad as positive and heartwarming (Benen 2015). We argue that while Wells Fargo may be trying to communicate brand sincerity (i.e. wholesome, sentimental, family-oriented; Aaker, 1997), consumers across the political spectrum considerably differ in how they interpret brand sincerity and the intended branding message.

Conservatives are more likely to resist change, support the status quo, and embrace traditionalism, and thereby have more negative attitudes toward the LGBTQ community (Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008; van der Toorn et al. 2017). It also follows that they will have a more traditional view of what constitutes brand sincerity (i.e. wholesome, family-friendly, sentimental). Thus, brand sincerity may be uniquely relevant to understanding how consumers with different moral sensibilities (i.e., liberals and conservatives) evaluate brands that wade into numerous morally and politically charged domains. This unique aspect of brand sincerity could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how consumers respond to LGBTQ representation in ads. For example, how LGBTQ representation is received in one ad may not be entirely indicative of how a viewer will react to the same representation by another brand.

Relatedly, the LGBTQ community has traditionally been excluded from traits and concepts captured by brand sincerity, such as family and wholesomeness (Kates 1999; Kille and Tse 2017). It follows that sincere brands may be particularly well positioned to positively depict the LGBTQ community and contribute to legitimizing this marginalized group. However, some marketers may be concerned about alienating some heterosexual, cisgender consumers (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Um, 2012). We find that a barrier to more sincere LGBTQ representations in ads may come from the perception among conservatives that LGBTQ representation makes a brand appear less sincere, that this representation is less suited to sincere brands (as opposed to exciting brands), and is evaluated more negatively.

A pilot study (N= 207, heterosexual) had participants view a Fanta ad with a same-sex couple. Participants then rated the extent to which it represented brand sincerity (down-to-earth, family-oriented, wholesome, etc.) and excitement (daring, trendy, cool, etc.). Political orientation was also measured. As predicted, conservatives rated the brand as lower on sincerity than did liberals, but if anything rated it as more exciting.

In an experimental design, Study 1 (N= 135, heterosexual) had participants view an ad that either had a same-sex (male) or opposite-sex couple. They rated i) their attitude toward the ad, ii) the extent to

which the ad reflects each of the five brand personality dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness), and iii) political orientation. The two-way interaction between ad (same-sex vs. opposite sex couple) and political orientation was only significant for ratings of sincerity and not the other four brand personality dimensions. Conservatives saw the same-sex ad as less sincere compared to liberals, and as less sincere than the opposite-sex ad. Parallel effects were found for ad attitudes. Finally, the moderated mediation effect was significant; when the ad featured a same-sex (opposite-sex) couple, more conservative participants saw the ad as less (more) sincere, which was associated with more negative (positive) attitudes.

Study 2 (N = 379, heterosexual) built off of Study 1 by also manipulating brand personality (sincere vs. exciting). The brand personality of a travel/tourism company was manipulated using imagery and the brand's tagline, similar to past research (Aaker et al. 2004). One of the images in the ad was either of a same-sex (female) or opposite-sex couple. Participants rated i) their attitudes toward the ad, and ii) the extent to which the couple in the ad fit the brand (actor-brand fit; e.g. "The couple in this advertisement are suited to the featured brand"; Pounders and Mabry-Flynn 2016). The three-way interaction between ad content (same-sex vs. opposite sex couple), brand personality (sincere vs. exciting), and political orientation was significant for predicting both actor-brand fit and ad attitudes. When the brand was sincere, conservatives saw the same-sex couple as a poorer fit for the brand, and rated the ad more negatively compared to liberals, and compared to the opposite-sex ad. However, when the brand was exciting, conservatives showed no preference for the opposite sex ad over the same-sex ad, nor did their attitudes differ from liberals.

We also surveyed fifty LGBTQ participants and asked what they would like to see more of in terms of LGBTQ representation. Thirty-two percent of responses made reference to content that is captured by brand sincerity (e.g. "family-oriented ads," "happy families," "wholesome, non-stereotypical" representations). We also analyzed 316 ads with LGBT content by having the advertised brand rated on sincerity vs. excitement by coders, and combined this with a publically available LGBTQ representation score (AdRespect.com). We found that ads for more sincere (vs. exciting) brands had more positive LGBTQ representation.

The current research leverages insights from work on brand personality and political ideology to gain a better understanding of how LGBTQ ads are interpreted by different consumers. Those advocating for more desirable and "real" LGBTQ representation may see sincere brands as particularly well positioned to do so, and help to legitimize the LGBTQ community by normalizing LGBTQ people are relationships. This inclusion may improve the brand's reputation among the LGBTQ community and its allies, but may come at the cost of alienating conservative consumers. Conversely, while the inclusion of LGBT content is relatively "safe" for exciting brands from an alienation point of view, such representations may not be sufficiently meaningful, progressive, or counter-stereotypical to earn goodwill or stand out among LGBT consumers and allies.

### **When Consensus Is Lost: Mobilizing Capital to Establish Consumer Legitimacy**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In the fight for consumer legitimacy, understanding the rules of the game is critical. In turn, most consumer research illuminates how consumers seek ways to better play by these rules to elevate their power and status in the marketplace (Scaraboto and Fischer

2013; Ustuner and Thompson 2012). These rules are grounded in the taken-for-granted cultural categories, and related status hierarchies, that structure our ways of being and acting in the world (Bourdieu 1998). Through socialization, individuals internalize dominant cultural categories in a structure Bourdieu terms the habitus, or the cultural unconscious (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). When the cultural categories we think with are called into question however (e.g., What is masculine or feminine? How should we understand sexuality? Or family?), society's basis for evaluating what significations, depictions and enactments are considered appropriate or legitimate is disrupted. For example, current debates revolve around reassessments of strict dichotomies of gender – with some moving away from traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity to more fluid conceptions of how people express their gender. This category disruption is evidenced for example by CoverGirl's move to hire its first CoverBoy spokesperson in 2016 (Valeriya 2016) as well as by Billy Porter's arrival on the Oscars red carpet in Christian Siriano's first tuxedo dress for men (Gonzales 2019). Further, the legalization of same-sex marriage points to a reconsideration of what sexual orientations are recognized as socially acceptable (Von Drehle 2013). Following these reconsiderations, there is a loss of consensus over what forms of capital are now valued within status games related to gender and sexuality.

We join an emerging body of consumer research that examines attempts to deviate from established rules (McAlexander et al. 2014; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Thompson and Ustuner 2015). In this prior work, consumers often have clear prescriptions or scripts for deviation. When cultural categories are called into question, however, consensus is lost and the script for deviating is unclear. Thus, prior work does not account for consumers' strategies for managing these types of disruptions. More specifically, as cultural categories are disrupted, how do consumers experience a loss of consensus over what is viewed as legitimate? Further, why do some consumers mobilize capital in attempts to reestablish consensus while others do not? Why do consumers enlist particular strategies over others?

To examine how consumers experience and respond to a loss of consensus in the marketplace, we utilized depth interviews with 30 same-sex couples and ethnographic observation at wedding expos to study the consumption experiences of same-sex couples. We elected to study the wedding industry because ideas of gender and sexuality are historically embedded within the gender dichotomy of the wedding script (centered on bride/groom), and same-sex marriage directly confronts this gender dichotomy (Otnes and Pleck 2003).

Our findings establish a lack of consensus around how to appropriately signify, enact, and depict masculinity and femininity in the wedding context. Consumers whose tastes and preferences depart from traditional executions of femininity and masculinity in the wedding context are tasked with cultivating new forms of embodied cultural capital – or acquiring new skills (e.g. how to propose, fit a tux, design an engagement ring) and orientations (e.g. how to display an engagement ring to others, how to wear a tux) around how to do gender differently in the wedding space (Thompson and Ustuner 2015). Consumers who possess these forms of capital often report experiencing misalignments, defined as a disparity between what they desire and experience in the marketplace. We find evidence of this disparity as consumers describe an absence of materials, roles, and representations that recognize and legitimize their desired tastes and preferences. A disrupted consensus can also result in disorientation for consumers, meaning a sense of confusion or an unmooring around what their desires necessarily are in the marketplace. These consumers are less sure about how to express their gender in the wedding context and are still trying to understand their place in its

script. They are in the process of acquiring the necessary forms of embodied cultural capital in order to discover these desired expressions. Further, reconsidering the gendered norms and expectations inculcated through one's primary socialization can generate complex feelings and judgements via the moral habitus through lingering illegitimacies (Kates 2002; Thompson and Ustuner 2015) – particularly when the rules or expectations on how to “appropriately” expand upon past prescriptions are unclear.

Some, but not all, consumers mobilize capital in efforts to manage this lack of consensus in the marketplace. More specifically, we identify how consumers' variations in moral capital and embodied cultural capital shape whether and how they engage in strategies aimed at addressing the misalignments or disorientation generated around their desired tastes and preferences. Here, moral capital – defined as (il)legitimacy around sexuality – acts as an entry card by determining *whether or not* consumers engage in mobilization strategies. Those who possess moral capital in their local field engage in these strategies, while those who lack this capital often resort to coping techniques detailed in prior literature (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Crockett 2017; Henry and Caldwell 2006). Embodied cultural capital directs *which* strategies consumers use, as it shapes whether consumers have the knowledge or skills needed to imagine and execute their desired gender expressions in the wedding context. Those with requisite embodied cultural capital tend to confront service providers in attempts to educate them on how to better respond to their evolving gendered tastes and preferences. In contrast, consumers lacking the requisite embodied cultural capital tend to either collaborate with service providers or experiment with gender resignifications through more experiential trial and error in efforts to cultivate new forms capital. Throughout this process of discovering and executing their desires, the moral habitus – as a foundation for moral judgments – shapes how consumers evaluate and judge their activities and aspirations in the marketplace.

### Effective Advertising to the LGBTQ Communities: An Exploratory Study

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The lack of gender diversity in the media, particularly advertising, has recently become a dominant thread in cultural and industry discourses (Kemp 2018). Additionally, although efforts in advertising have been made to incorporate content inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) perspectives, and have been successful at times, oftentimes these representations fall short. Traditionally, many of these ads have been associated with specific (and often stereotypical) product types, such as fashion and alcohol (Tsai 2011) and tend to be predominantly featured during specific times, such as Pride Month. This is surprising, as the buying power of this market has grown over \$80 billion from 2015 to an estimated \$987 billion in 2017. Marketers have long justified outreach to gay and lesbian consumers because of their spending power and consumer loyalty (Oakenfull 2012). Shifting social and economic norms also suggest the importance of increasing inclusivity to this particular market. According to a 2017 Gallup Poll, 10 million Americans identify as LGBTQ, and 7.3% of millennials identify as sexual and/or gender minorities, and younger people, especially Generation Z, are less committed to traditional gender norms, embracing queer identities and seeking brands who reflect similar perspectives. While some recent ad campaigns have been successful in integrating diverse LGBTQ representations, advertising that encompasses a complex representation of sexuality and gender is lacking. Further, there

is scant academic research that has focused on investigating effective advertising strategies to the LGBTQ community.

Provided the lack of extant research in the area, an exploratory study was conducted. A total of thirty-three individuals participated in semi-structured interviews between August 2017 and May 2018. Specifically, participants included national brand managers, communication directors, consultants, public relations specialists, chief executive officers, chief operating officers, directors, presidents, and vice-presidents. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were digitally recorded, and were transcribed in full. Textual data was analyzed using an iterative part-to-whole method of the constant comparison (Spiggle 1994).

The most prominent theme that emerged was inclusive and authentic advertising. We define inclusive authentic advertising as content that encompasses the diversity of lived experiences of LGBTQ communities. Within the discussion of inclusive authentic advertising different facets of inclusivity emerged: nuanced representations, or the depiction of complex representations of sexual and gender minorities, intentional visibility effects or the importance of concentrating integrated brand efforts within the LGBTQ community on a consistent basis, and universal messaging, or communicating content that resonates with people regardless of gender or sexual identity.

Participants discussed at length how LGBTQ audiences desire more nuanced representations that encompass their lived realities and represent the diversity of their and gender identity – and how oftentimes this is lacking in contemporary advertising. For example, participants indicated that LGBTQ audiences want content that is representative of the communities they live in, the families and relationships they have, and the professions and careers they work in. The notion of avoiding overt traditional stereotypes (e.g., effeminate gay man, masculine lesbian) emerged, but even more prominent was the importance, and often failure to depict the LGBTQ community in a complex manner that is consistent with realistic representativeness. This emerged when discussing race, family, and the lack of bisexual and transgender imagery. For example, one participant stated:

Marketers wanting to include transgender representations in advertising need to feature actual transgender individuals. Additionally, the experiences and perspectives of transgender individuals are diverse and complex, and marketing to this audience needs to reflect this heterogeneity.

Participants also spoke about the historical invisibility of bisexual and transgender perspectives in marketing, as well as a lack of authentic representations of these populations in contemporary advertising, pointing to the importance of intentional visibility efforts to combat this historical erasure. To enhance perceptions of authenticity, participants suggested brands engage with transgender populations and their allies to understand the diversity of trans experiences. This observation was noted by several participants. For example, one participant stated:

With the “B” and the “T,” we’ve not done any marketing campaigns [targeting] those communities. We talk about it with [clients]...but we’ve not had a client that says, “Hey, we have a strong business opportunity with trans women or trans men.”

Another participant explained the importance of being consistent in terms of being visible:

I want to emphasize that my job is make sure we’re out in the community all year not just during Pride. We launched a campaign to support our 30th anniversary of commitment to LGBTQ community.

Additionally, to increase perceptions of inclusivity and authenticity, participants stressed the importance of communicating content that resonates with people regardless of gender or sexual identity –

employing universal messages. For example when discussing effective campaigns, one participant shared:

It has to mesh with what the brand is overall for everyone. It has to be part of that. So it's more important to that audience but you can't make it something different. And that's really important. It has to have the same -- it has to be communicated pretty much in the similar tone and manner

Another shared the following sentiment when discussing a national campaign that was met with unwavering success:

We really put the whole imagery of this total family. What was important was the LGBT family was put out not as a one-off but was part of what the American family is. It wasn't separating LGBT. It was putting it out in total to the masses.

In sum, this work contributes to the literature on gender in advertising. There has been little research focus on LGTQ advertising and sexual and gender minorities, and much of this work has focused on heterosexual response to LGBTQ advertising. Additionally, there is little research in advertising literature that examines best practices to reaching LGBTQ communities. The present work addresses this gap both by identifying the importance of inclusivity and authenticity in advertising messages targeted to LGBTQ communities, and defining what inclusive and authentic advertising is to LGBTQ consumers – nuanced representations, intentional visibility effects, and universal messaging.

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