The SAGE Handbook of Marketing Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing to and marketing featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual (LGBT) characters is a relatively recent phenomenon, which occurred concurrently with the increased visibility and social acceptance of LGBT people in society, at least in Western democracies. Reflecting upon the significant political and social progress in terms of visibility and acceptance of the LGBT community, the purpose of this chapter is to review the emerging, constantly changing extant literature on about marketing to this community, with a focus on the debate touching upon ethical issues. In addition, areas for future research are pointed out.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In many Western countries, a commercial LGBT culture emerged after the decriminalisation of homosexuality, which occurred largely during the late 1960s to the 1980s (Illinois: 1961; UK: 1967; Germany (East): 1967; Germany (West): 1968; Connecticut: 1971; South Australia, 1975; and so on). While there are few surviving examples of pre-legalisation marketing, specifically to gay men, these were relatively rare and covert (e.g. using specific symbolism that could only be understood by the target audience). Similarly, mainstream advertising used to pick up gay and homoerotic themes, but in such a way that straight consumers were unlikely to recognise this as such (Klara, 2013).

The early LGBT liberation movement was largely non-commercial, if not anti-capitalist, in nature. Instead of promoting economic inclusion, it focused on political and social ideals. This changed during the late 1980s and into the 1990s, when gay identity started to be promoted more openly based upon a consumerist expression of identity. Central to this stance was the idea of achieving equality through emphasis on consumption and emphasising the supposedly significant purchasing power (the pink pound/dollar), and thus portraying gay men in particular as a profitable target market for marketers. Thus, gay men were portrayed as conspicuous consumers, who are wealthy, hedonistic and particularly receptive for upscale products (Badgett, 2003).

During the 1990s, marketing to the LGBT community also drew increased academic interest. The publication of a seminal (double-)issue of the Journal of Homosexuality looking at marketing to the LGBT community in 1996 foreshadowed...
The ethical issues in marketing to the LGBT community have been extensively debated in the literature. These issues range from the effects of using homosexual imagery (Bhat et al., 1996) and marketplace discrimination (Jones, 1996; Walters & Curran, 1996) to the uneasy relationship between the LGBT movement and the marketplace (Peñaloza, 1996).

Inclusion of and marketing to LGBT consumers does indeed appear to make economic sense: several studies suggest that gay consumers long for the feeling of social acceptance assumed to be given by inclusion in marketing/media. In return, these consumers reward companies with fervent brand loyalty (Kates, 2004; Tuten, 2006). The perception of advertising portrayals as ‘role models’ plays a dominant role in this positive effect for marketers: LGBT media role models have been found to elicit feelings of pride in LGBT consumers (Nölke, 2018), who identify with the role models and feel represented by them. The positive effect appears to persist even if portrayals are perceived as highly stereotypical and the message is considered commercialised (Tsai, 2011).

POPULARITY OF LGBT-TARGETED ADVERTISING

Marketing to LGBT consumers is particularly popular in three areas: tourism, lifestyle and social marketing. Space prevents a full discussion of each of these areas; however, it is useful to review these briefly, in order to discuss some of the ethical aspects covered in this chapter later on.

Gay, and to a much lesser extent lesbian, tourism has been important to the LGBT community as a place to escape, experience community and to ‘let go’ (Johnston, 2012). LGBT tourism has many economic advantages, and is considered an attractive business opportunity and marketing strategy for many destinations (Melián-González et al., 2011). Not surprisingly then, the LGBT tourism market has grown and diversified significantly, ranging from exclusively gay cruises to spiritual retreats (Dahl & Barreto, 2020).

Lifestyle-based marketing specifically to, or featuring, LGBT people is mostly centred on fashion, design, technology and alcoholic beverages. For instance, Amazon Kindle used a married gay couple to market the e-Reader (Um, 2016), DocMartins and Nike have released rainbow-coloured shoes, and many Pride events are sponsored by alcohol brands (Spivey et al., 2018).

Finally, a number of social marketing campaigns target LGBT people specifically. For instance, the majority of social marketing campaigns promoting HIV testing are designed specifically for men who have sex with men (Olawepo et al., 2019). Because of increased risk of being a smoker, there are LGBT specific anti-tobacco campaigns (Navarro et al., 2019) and there is increasing discussion on how to tackle the increased risk of mental health incidences among LGBT people.

Criticisms: ‘Selling Out’ and ‘Going to the Market’

Notwithstanding the advances the LGBT community has achieved with the strategy of promoting the pink pound/dollar, there has been outspoken criticism against the perceived ‘selling out’ of the LGBT movement (Chasin, 2001). Much of the criticism is based on the effects that commercialisation, specifically the marketing towards and representation of LGBT characters in marketing to a wider audience, has had of an originally political and social movement.

Many of these criticisms could be described as bitter sweet: on the one side, as alluded to above, representation is often seen as something positive, but on the other side, the portrayal is frequently criticised as stereotypical or even derogative. This stems from a heavily sensitised concern for the impact of marketing activities on the group interest (Peñaloza, 1996).

In order to discuss the ethical issues related to marketing to and featuring LGBT people, I will now first discuss the central role of representation with a media environment.

Representing the LGBT Community – Or What Is Represented?

Representation, or display of LGBT characters in marketing, is pivotal to many of the ethical issues covered in this chapter. The term representation itself is somewhat ambiguous, and often used interchangeably with portrayal. For the terms of this chapter, representation refers to all portrayals of LGBT characters – that is, where they are visible. I acknowledge, though, that invisibility, as the opposite of representation, has been described as either absolute (i.e. no representations at all) or relative (i.e. no positive, reaffirming representations) (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008).

A few decades ago any form of representation was mostly non-existent outside of specifically LGBT+-targeted media. Increasingly, though, companies are including LGBT+ characters in their advertising (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Nölke,
2018). Today, overt gay and lesbian imagery appears regularly in mainstream advertising, especially of gay men and for brands and in product categories which are associated with edgy and unconventional imagery, such as travel, design, fashion and alcohol (Tsai, 2011).

**REPRESENTATION AS PROVIDER OF GUIDANCE, SUPPORT AND TO ESTABLISH SOCIAL NORMS**

Media representation is important to establish social norms, and provides support and guidance for LGBT people particularly during the process of coming out and in constructing their own identity (Dhoest & Simons, 2012). For LGBT people, the desire to be portrayed as ‘normal’, that is to say part of the fabric of society and not reduced to simple stereotypes, is important (Dhoest & Simons, 2012); that is, different facets of diverse personalities are represented, rather than a reductionist portrayal focusing on sexual orientation alone.

Representation of minorities in the media usually follows a pattern originally observed by Berry (1980), and going through three stages: a stereotypic phase, which is followed by a phase of ‘new awareness’, and finally a stabilisation phase, where minority characters are largely integrated and appear equal to the majority culture in the representation. Although somewhat dated, an analysis of the 2001 fall season of US television found that in terms of gay and lesbian representation, this had only partially progressed beyond the first stage (stereotypic representation). This mirrors a concern often found in the literature, where LGBT people consider media representation of LGBT characters as being stereotypical and/or subject to ridicule (Tsai, 2011).

**REPRESENTATION AND SELF-PERCEPTION**

Cultural factors affect an individual’s self-perception and contribute to building their personal identity (Hammack, 2005). Role models shown in the media affect individuals’ self-perception, with individuals showing higher levels of self-esteem when they are perceiving themselves to be similar to the displayed role models (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). While an extensive review of the interaction of media displays of a target audience and the target audience itself is beyond the scope of this chapter, I note that the majority of studies find that media (including advertising) representation has a strong impact on the target audience (see also Chapter 12 in this *Handbook* for some theoretical explanations and further details of this interaction in Gomillion & Giuliano (2011) for a fuller review).

**The Question Therefore Is: How Diverse and Representative Is Media Representation?**

There are indications that a diverse representation is improving; however, LGBT characters overall are far from representative. On the whole, studies looking at LGBT characters, including those in advertising, found these depictions to be reductionist, and limited to certain ‘acceptable’ or perceived wisdom representations. Specifically, the overwhelming majority of represented characters were white, middle-class, gender-normative, and mostly male (Tsai, 2004) – otherwise described as ‘youthful, shirtless, hairless and muscular’ (Marshall, 2011, p. 4). Contrary to this representation, the LGBT population as a whole is actually more ethnically and gender-diverse than the population identifying as heterosexual (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009).

More recent studies have found some improvement, particularly a decline in hypersexual representation and a more complex character representation. Despite the improvement, representation still remains largely unrepresentative (Nölke, 2018), and most characters conform to what has been described as a heteronormative and domesticated version of largely male, white, gay consumers. Contrary to previous studies, though, Nölke (2018) finds that the dominant gay male character is not young as previously reported, but middle-aged, middle-class and Caucasian – an indication that marketers aim to target the more affluent middle-aged gay consumers, whereas before the target seemed to be more younger gay consumers.

**Under-representation of Lesbian Consumers**

On the other hand, the scarcity of ethnic diversity and under-representation of lesbian consumers being portrayed has caused concern amongst researchers (Ginder & Byun, 2015).

Sender (2012) speculated that the inadequate representation of lesbian consumers is linked to the ‘stereotype of the dour, unsexy lesbian’
(p. 200). Nölke (2018) in her analysis finds that the majority of lesbians portrayed in advertising are indeed a ‘femme’, meaning they adhere to societal beauty standards (e.g. look feminine, often with longer hair, and do not look ‘butch’) and are shown as being in a loving, committed relationship. Other lesbian imagery was relatively rare, which may support Sender’s (2012) argument that only those LGBT characters that do not overtly challenge the societal norms are allowed to feature in mainstream (and to some extent LGBT-targeted) advertising.

**PERCEPTION OF LGBT CHARACTERS BY NON-LGBT VIEWERS**

There is a body of research which, in turn, looks at how LGBT characters in advertising are perceived by non-LGBT-identifying viewers. Much of this research relies on advertising characters making oblique references to being LGBT, rather than overt display of same-sex attraction. For example, adverts may show two men on a beach together, but without physical contact. Such oblique references are used to avoid a potential negative backlash against a brand, as studies have shown that overt references have the potential to lead to negative brand evaluations (Um, 2014; 2016). Importantly, though, a meta-analysis of studies related to homosexual imagery found that there was no net effect on persuasion of either using or not using LGBT imagery (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). While a full discussion of the literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, broadly the literature converges towards two conclusions (Tsai, 2004).

Firstly, many oblique references are not picked up by non-LGBT-identifying viewers, that is the characters are not perceived as being LGBT.

Secondly, of those viewers who do recognise the LGBT characters as such, those viewers who hold more positive attitudes towards LGBT people tend to respond positively, while others respond negatively.

**HOMONORMATIVITY – OR THE REPRESENTATION OF LGBT CHARACTERS AS (NEARLY) STRAIGHT**

Central to the critical discussion of representation is which aspects of LGBT people are made visible, the overwhelming feeling from the critical discourse and reflection upon the portrayals is that largely socially acceptable characters, which do not challenge any societal norms, are being portrayed as role models and repetitive of the far more diverse and complex LGBT community.

While even the limited representation is, on the one side, validating, confining and emancipating, depending on which values are portrayed, representation can, on the other side, also reinforce aspects of the status quo and the majority culture. This is because minority consumers strive to elevate their social status and acceptance in the existing social hierarchy (Tsai, 2011) by comparing themselves with portrayed role models and living up to the portrayals. As Tsai (2011) further points out, minority consumers often display constant concerns about social stigma and are conscious of their marginality. At the same time, many aspire for mainstream membership, an aspiration that can only be fulfilled through assimilation of LGBT consumers through what authors on the critical side of the debate call ‘normalisation’, meaning reducing the stigmatic distinctiveness of their sub-culture. That is to say, the long-term effect is that LGBT consumers, instead of celebrating their diversity and finding more acceptance, are themselves mimicking norms of the heterosexual world in an LGBT environment.

This process has become known as ‘homonormativity’, or the result of a politic of assimilation (Duggan, 2002). That is to say, the majority norms and values of an ascribed superior heterosexual society, particularly in relation to lived sexuality and personal relationships, become dominant: that is, monogamy, gender binary and cisgenderism should be replicated and lived in the LGBT community.

**WHOLESOME NORMALITY FOR ADVERTISERS**

For advertisers, promoting homonormativity solves a conundrum of targeting specifically gay male consumers (Sender, 2012). During the early days of media targeted at LGBT people, advertisements targeting gay males often featured sexual activities, such as advertising for sex clubs, pornography and telephone sex. During the 1980s and 1990s, overtly sexual advertising was largely dropped and replaced with a more ‘wholesome’ depiction of sexuality, or indeed only implied sexuality. Sender (2012) discusses the issues related to the more conservative approach taken by LGBT media at length, noting that some in the LGBT community saw this as a move towards a more highbrow and sophisticated depiction of the (gay male) community. Advertisers at the time
INTERSECTIONALITY

A different lens with which to observe representation of the LGBT community in marketing communications and mainstream media is to focus on the representation of ‘intersectional personalities’. Intersectionality has its roots in feminism, and is a way to explore multiple points of marginalisation, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc. The assumption is that all political and social identities of a person overlap and potentially result in multiplicative oppression. For instance, a person may be black, disabled and bisexual.

Intersectional analysis of representation leads to a richer picture of representation than conventional analysis by challenging the assumption that race, gender, sexual orientation and so forth are independent demographic variables. Specifically in regard to the LGBT community, the sole focus on sexuality as the only locus of identity results in a simplistic analysis of representation, and is in danger of ignoring how sexuality intersects with other social categories. Thus, intersectional analysis is an important tool in researching marketplace diversity (Gopaldas, 2013).

In terms of advancement of representation, a diverse representation, that is to say representing a multitude of intersectional personalities, is also a sign of a more advanced representation, such as the stabilising phase of the Berry (1980) framework.

To date, many authors have lamented a lack of diverse representation of LGBT characters, yet few authors have systematically approached the subject. The only systematic study was conducted by Nölke (2018), who found only very limited intersectional representation. Thus, Nölke concluded that ‘the analysis highlights how the erasure of multiply marginalized groups in mainstream advertising continues to perpetuate a heteronormative, domesticized version of “gayness”’ (p. 224). Moreover, Trans* characters are sparsely represented in advertising. As Nölke (2018) finds, a small number of trans men appeared around 2015, all middle-class and Caucasian. On the other hand, transfemales were invisible – only drag queens were represented. As Nölke concludes, this may lead to a ‘likely association … by unknowing audiences’ (p. 242).

Homonormative and non-intersectional representation has its vocal critics: Duggan (2002) laments the lack of political ambition in a homonormative world, where ‘politics … does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’ (p. 179). In a similar way, Kates (2004) critiques the observed assimilationist representation of LGBT characters in media as a hetero-normalized understanding of the LGBT community that contradicts modern queer activism. The main concern that all of these authors share is that through current representation, LGBT consumers internalise such representations and the displayed values into their self-concept (e.g. Petaloza, 1996; Tsai, 2011) and thus lose the political, social and progressive agenda of the early LGBT movement. Despite these criticisms, based on a qualitative analysis of a Belgian LGB cohort, Dhoest and Simons (2012) note that overwhelmingly respondents were happy with the perceived improved representation of LGBT characters in mainstream media. They also note the absence of voices mentioning homonormativity or critically reflecting on it in their sample.

EFFECTS OF TARGETED MARKETING – BEYOND BEING SEEN

Beyond the concerns regarding homonormativity and intersectionality, other ethical issues related to
targeting LGBT consumers are more similar to concerns of the effects of marketing to mainstream consumers.

**Promotion of a Negative Body Image**

A line of literature has voiced concerns over the body image shown in LGBT-targeted marketing communications. In general, LGBT populations, and especially gay men, are significantly more likely than the general population to suffer from low body satisfaction, eating disorders and low self-esteem related to their appearance (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2016). Much of this has traditionally been attributed to a combination of ‘minority stress’, where members of a stigmatised group have chronically high levels of stress in response to internalised homophobia, expected stigma, discrimination or prejudice and experiences of physical attacks, as well as a desire to conform to perceived ‘masculine norms’ (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005).

However, increasingly the role that advertising plays is also being questioned. For example, Saucier and Caron (2008) investigated the images used in advertisements in gay-targeted magazines, and concluded that the vast majority of men represented were under 30, lean and muscular, shirtless – and 95% white. They concluded that these images are what ‘men compare their bodies to and potentially reinforce or create feelings of low self-worth and esteem’ (p. 520).

**Age, Size and Body Image and the LGBT Community – A Complex Issue**

The issue, though, may be more complex: pressure to look young and attractive is a frequently mentioned trait of the gay community, and certainly predates LGBT-targeted advertising. Thus the pressure originates both within the gay community itself and is reinforced through gay-targeted media and marketing, leading to a complex interaction of actual and portrayed social norms not dissimilar to those found in skin-whitening products (see Chapter 12 for a discussion of this). For instance, Suen (2017) notes that ageism is rife within the gay community, and constantly reinforced by gay men themselves. As a result of this, gay men are said to invest more in their appearance and have a higher frequency of shopping each month for apparel and grooming-related products than straight men (Strubel & Petrie, 2018). This ‘catch-22’ situation makes the target group more attractive to advertisers, who then reinforce the existing and unobtainable beauty ideals.

Related to the exclusion of older gay men is the inclusion of larger gay men: Nölke (2018) suggests the ‘absolute invisibility of non-lean characters’ (p. 244) is likely to result in a feeling of double marginalisation for those who do not approximate this (and other) beauty standards. Marginalised on the one side because of their sexual orientation, and then on the other side marginalised again, within their community, because of failing to meet an unachievable beauty standard.

Notwithstanding the above, within the gay male community there is a relatively prominent sub-culture of larger men, who describe themselves as ‘Bears’. This sub-culture appears more diverse than the traditional ‘lean and young’ gay culture, emphasising maturity, body hair and larger body frames (Manley et al., 2007). Despite the growing popularity of this ‘counter culture’ to the portrayed gay scene, ‘Bear’ characters feature seldomly in LGBT advertising. However, celebrating a more body-shape-inclusive culture also has its potential for unintended consequences: concerns have been raised that celebrating an ‘obese’ culture is likely to result in health problems for those aiming to obtain the ‘Bear’ beauty ideal (Gough & Flanders, 2009).

**An Even Less Diverse Representation of Lesbian Characters**

While the representative representation of (gay) males, and thus also the construction of role models, may be problematic, representation of women is even less diverse: As Gill (2008) notes: ‘older women, disabled women, fat women and any woman who is unable to live up to the increasingly narrow standards of [the heteronormative] female beauty and sex appeal that are normatively required’ (p. 42) are virtually invisible. More outspokenly, Ginder and Byun (2015) conclude: ‘[T]he lack of female representation continues to propagate patriarchal dominance and a history of lesbian invisibility within the marketplace’ (p. 838).

The lack of lesbian and bisexual female representation versus gay male representation has been attributed to lesbians being perceived as less powerful and more supportive of anti-capitalist, feminist ideals. Notably, though, this myth is largely the result of another myth: that of the wealthy gay (male) consumer.

**The Myth of the Affluent Gay Male**

The enduring myth of the affluent, well-educated and spending happy gay consumer is, despite
overwhelming evidence to the contrary, still much used as an argument to attract businesses to market to gay consumers. Yet, gay males have been found to be significantly less well off than their straight counterparts (McDermott 2014). For instance, 29% of LGBTQ adults experience food insecurity in the USA (16% of the general population). The poverty rate among gay men aged 18–44 is 20.5% (compared with 15.3% for heterosexual males). In fact, precariousness of LGBT consumers remains a complex area, in which many different intersectional factors combine, including overall lower wages, limited legal protection and higher rates of poverty in addition to an ethnically more diverse population (for a full review see Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015).

BEYOND COMMUNICATION: TARGETING THE LGBT MARKET WITH HARMFUL PRODUCTS

While marketing communications make up the bulk of research related to marketing to the LGBT target group, other areas, despite being less visible in the research streams, throw up significant ethical concerns about targeting sexual minority groups with advertising of unhealthy products (and health-related marketing).

Smoking and Tobacco-Related Products

In terms of consuming potentially harmful products, LGBT people are not only significantly more likely to smoke in general, but also less likely to smoke supposedly less harmful ‘smokefree’ cigarettes than their heterosexual counterparts (Azagba et al., 2019). With large numbers of smokers, more gay men are forecast to die from smoke-related illnesses than HIV/AIDS (Max et al., 2019). Moreover, LGBT people have consistently been found to have a higher binge-drinking frequency (Hess et al., 2015), particularly among younger men who have sex with men (Mutchler et al., 2014), and overall gay men have been found to start drinking at a younger age than their straight counterparts (Grosso et al., 2019).

While it is notoriously difficult to link marketing activity to specific behaviours, concerns have been raised in relation to the large-scale sponsorship of LGBT events, such as Pride parades, parties and cruises, by three types of marketers: the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries. These concerns do not only relate to event-related funding, but also extend to funding given directly to community organisations (Drabble, 2000).

One of the most spectacular cases of tobacco marketing also concerns the LGBT community (among others). Project ‘SCUM’, short for Sub-Culture Urban Marketing, was a programme designed by the tobacco industry to market specifically to gay men and homeless people. As Stevens et al. (2004) note in their review of the project, smoking rates increased in the LGBT population concurrent with the project. While direct-to-consumer advertising has been heavily restricted for tobacco products, the tobacco industry has been using cigarette packages to target different social demographics, including the LGBT community (Cruz et al., 2019).

From Safe Sex to Stressful Sex

As a response to the promotion of unhealthy products and other health inequalities, social marketing campaigns have targeted LGBT people. Most well known among these are social marketing campaigns to prevent HIV infection, with the most notorious examples of scaremongering among the early campaigns (e.g. the falling tombstones campaign of the late 1980s in the UK). Many lessons have been learned from the early days, and many campaigns running today have more positive evaluations. For example, social marketing interventions, such as the social branding programme CRUSH, which targets LGBT youth by organising smoke-free party events, are promising to reduce tobacco use among their target audience (Fallin et al., 2015).

However, even well-meaning campaigns for promoting safer sex, for example, may have unintended consequences, as Starks et al. (2013) found, in the presence of minority stress. In this case, even HIV-negative individuals might experience stress based on expected negative evaluations by the majority culture if they were to be diagnosed positive. This stress can potentially be increased by exposure to safer sex advertising.

The Moral behind HIV– Prevention

A different ethical conundrum is the provision of PrEP. PrEP is a medication, originally used to treat HIV infection, that can also be taken daily to reduce the chances of contracting HIV, even with unprotected sex, to levels similar to those with condom use (Spinner et al., 2016). However, provision of PrEP is expensive – and there has been
concern that sexual promiscuity and with it other forms of sexually transmitted infection (STI) could rise. While the scientific evidence does not support this claim, there are some claiming that an observed rise in STIs among men who have sex with men (MSM) is likely part of an overall rise in STI (Ramchandani & Golden, 2019), and others have found that PrEP use actually decreased the number of sexual partners and condom use did not change (Spinner et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there is an often morally charged debate on whether or not to provide PrEP as part of state health systems. Data from different European countries, as of September 2019, shows that PrEP is available in some countries without cost and fully accessible to people who request it (e.g. in Scotland), while other countries currently run ‘trial programmes’ admitting a specific number of users (e.g. England), and others have made PrEP available formally, though do not cover the cost (Italy), while yet other countries have not made PrEP available at all (e.g. Hungary).

CSR: PAINTING THE WORLD IN PINK, SOMETIMES

LGBT images feature relatively prominently in marketing communications in Western countries, as previously noted (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Nölke, 2018). LGBT causes also feature strongly in many CSR initiatives, and have been linked to increased recruitment selection, better retention and financial performance (Pichler et al., 2018). A full review of CSR ethics is beyond the scope of this chapter, and covered later in Chapter 21 of this Handbook.

In respect to CSR initiatives involving LGBT themes, ethical issues arise when there is an incongruence between an organisation’s internal and external position, most prominently when an organisation takes little or no internal LGBT rights promoting CSR action, while making external CSR claims about their inclusiveness. This position is known as a ‘Washing Position’ (Ginder et al., 2019). In short, the washing position refers to an organisation failing to practise what it preaches, particularly when the company engages in marketing communication seemingly supporting the cause. A different issue can arise when organisations donate to conflicting causes. For instance, several organisations which support Pride events in the USA donated to politicians opposing LGBT protection (Champlin, 2019). Similarly, several companies were found to support Brazilian president Bolsonaro, who openly advocates homophobic policies, while these companies supposedly also supported LGBT rights (Ruggiero, 2019).

A highly controversial issue is the supposedly strategic marketing of Israel as a gay-friendly country: As Schulman (2011) reports, the Israeli government created a marketing plan embracing the gay community to reposition its global image. This plan included a $90 million campaign positioning Tel Aviv as a ‘gay vacation destination’.

In the case of Israel, the underlying logic was that some people, especially in Western Europe and North America, judge a country’s advancement by how advanced the country responds to LGBT issues (Schulman, 2011). Critics were quick to point out that gay rights in Israel were far from world-leading, and that the campaign appeared to attempt to offset human rights violations in other areas (Puar, 2010).

... THE EVOLVING SOCIAL MEDIA SIDE

Finally, no marketing text would be complete without touching upon social media. Despite the popularity, though, research into the effects and potential ethical issues of marketing on social media targeting the LGBT community remains scant. At the same time there is an ongoing debate about how social media as a medium and as a tool to meet other people are affecting the LGBT community, which I will briefly summarise here.

(Self-)portrayal of LGBT people on social media has been characterised as in many ways empowering, playing the part of a role model, particularly in the early stages of coming to terms with one’s own identity and sexual orientation. Craig and McInroy (2014) find that social media enabled participants to access resources, which in turn allowed them to explore their own identity, find likeness, and cumulating in a ‘digital coming out’. Similarly positive conclusions are drawn by Giano (2019), who found online experiences catalysed the coming-out process, play a significant role in realising one’s own sexual orientation, and are helpful in affirming one’s sexual identity. Contrasting the positive views, concerns about online bullying, particularly towards and among younger LGBT people, have been voiced (Walls et al., 2019). There have also been concerns raised as to the effect of algorithms and moderation guidelines used by social media platforms on the types of posts being displayed to friends and followers. While there is little academic research specifically on the topic of LGBT posts, the mainstream press reported that some social networks
are overly zealous in banning LGBT content (Hern, 2019) or in other ways hide or restrict LGBT content (Allen, 2018).

A large focus of the debate about online and digital media has been the plethora of different dating and hook-up apps, some of which are geared towards often specific segments of the LGBT community, such as Grindr for gay men and Scruff for ‘Bears’, while others are inclusive of all gender and sexual identities (such as Tinder). All of these platforms are location-based social networking tools, meaning that they show other users who are within a particular distance of the current user. Thus, they enable both users to meet relatively easily. Strong concerns have been raised that these apps encourage risky sexual behaviour and lead to more sexual contacts, although the evidence of this points to a more complex picture (Byron, 2017).

Both traditional social media and hook-up apps have been studied as tools to deliver health promotion messages to the LGBT community, in particular HIV and sexual health-related messages. Two systematic reviews (Cao et al., 2017; Muessig et al., 2015) have reviewed these interventions and concluded that they offer an effective way to deliver health-related messages. Most of the campaigns reviewed used Facebook or Grindr as a medium. Unfortunately, no similar studies are available for commercial marketing messages sent/targeted to the LGBT community on social media/hook-up apps.

To summarise, while there is some extant research into the effect of social media on the LGBT community, future research is needed to evaluate how marketing using the social media channel affects the LGBT people.

CONCLUSION: MOVING TOWARDS THE FUTURE …

In relation to ethical issues concerning marketing to LGBT people, there are three main concerns expressed in the literature:

Firstly, the homogeneous, and stereotypical, representation of LGBT individuals in marketing materials, leading to internalised norms in different areas, ranging from beauty ideals to how to conduct romantic relationships. In short, is it advisable to normalise diverse groups through assimilation? Or is there a way to include diverse representations?

Secondly, the promotion of unhealthy products to the community, which in turn is receptive towards positive marketing advances, because these instil a feeling of recognition and acceptance, a situation that is potentially shared with other minority groups.

Thirdly, the (mis)use of the LGBT community as a progressive ‘anchor point’, particularly in the context of pink washing and deflecting from other, less ethical practices.

The question thus is: how can we improve current marketing practice? Pointing out the unethical or potentially problematic practices will not, in itself, lead to a solution, particularly in the absence of research examining the effects. The case of marketing to the LGBT community highlights an interesting issue from an ethical perspective in relation to calls for a more diverse, representative and inclusive representation: Dhoest and Simon’s (2012) research shows that there is possibly little in-community support for calls for greater diversity. This is supported by Tsai (2011), who also found that even where LGBT community members felt that the portrayal of LGBT people was highly stereotypical, the effect on the brand was still positive overall. Of course, such divergence is by no means unique to the LGBT community. For example, the issue is similar to the situation of skin-whitening products, which are seen as both empowering and disempowering at the same time (Li et al., 2008).

Notes

1 There is an extensive debate about the term LGBT and how reflective it is of the wide variety of gender and sexual orientations manifest in the non-heterosexual/non-heterophile community. In this chapter I use the term as the term most commonly associated with the community, and understand it as an all-encompassing term.

2 Men with a larger body frame.

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