BRANDING BEYOND THE RAINBOW: AN EXPLORATION OF

AUTHENTIC ADVERTISING FOR GEN-Z'S LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

by

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ABSTRACT

"Brand authenticity" is an interesting concept. It's difficult to objectively define, hard to effectively execute, yet remains a requirement in winning the hearts of consumer audiences. Generation-Z, the most diverse and openly LGBTQ+ generation yet, places high value upon authenticity and purpose-driven marketing. This creates a challenge for advertisers as they adapt their messaging to the next big wave of spenders; brands must find a way to connect with Gen-Z's LGBTQ+ audience without engaging in the pitfalls of rainbow-washing, a phenomenon defined as the commodification of LGBTQ+ liberation through inauthentic corporate practices. While previous studies suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to authentic corporate messaging, this study expands upon our understanding of what is valued by an important subset of Gen-Z through the lens of signaling theory. This quantitative research among Gen-Z participants suggests that marketers should focus their messaging on LGBTQ+ representation, backed by corporate integrity and credibility through acts of corporate social activism with tangible benefits to the LGBTQ+ community.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Brand authenticity" is an interesting concept. It's difficult to define, hard to execute, yet remains a requirement in winning the eyes, ears, and hearts of consumer audiences. The generation that places the highest value on it, Generation-Z (Gen-Z), has completely redefined the meaning of authenticity in corporate contexts (Gorey, 2022). This creates a challenge for advertisers as they adapt their messaging to the next big wave of spenders, who will account for a quarter of global income by 2030 (Wolff, 2022).

Gen-Z, born between 1997-2012, is an audience of young adults on several marketers' radar, known by an array of diverse identities, digital savviness and passion for activism. Gen-Z's spending power is on the rise, recently weighing in at $360 billion in disposable income (Fromm, 2022). Though this sets Gen-Z up as the next big wave of money-makers, reaching them in a meaningful way may prove difficult (Fromm, 2022). As Wundermann Thompson put it, "this is a generation born of paradoxes and at home with multi-hyphenates: they're disillusioned and zealous; they have digital DNA and prize in-person interactions; they are pragmatic and impassioned; they are tolerant and at their wits' end." (Chen et al., 2020, pg 9) In other words, Gen-Z doesn't play by traditional rules nor with they fit into easily segment binaries. Studies have consistently shown that Gen-Z doesn't want to be put into a box (Chen et al., 2020), with 78% valuing the importance of defining their own identities without subscribing to labels (Strang, 2022), resulting in a generation that is not one-size-fits-all (Cheung et al., 2017).

Gen-Z might not let labels like gender and sexuality define who they are (Chen et. al, 2020; Strang, 2022), but that doesn't mean that their gender and sexual identities aren't important to them. Gen-Z is exceptionally diverse when it comes to gender identity

and sexuality, with 21% self-identifying as LGBT in a 2022 Gallup poll, which is nearly double the rate of Millennials, five times that of Generation X and eight times the rate of Baby Boomers, making Gen-Z the most openly-queer generation yet (Porterfield, 2022). In addition, Gen-Z tends to view gender and sexuality as a spectrum, with a fifth of Gen-Z respondents in a Wunderman Thompson Intelligence survey anticipating that their gender identity will change throughout their lives (Chen et al., 2020).

Deeply held beliefs and identities are an important factor in crafting messaging that resonates with Gen-Z, as they have a collective belief in their ability to change the world has affected the way that they spend (Chen et al., 2020). This group has come of age in an era of sociopolitical polarization, economic recessions, inequality, an ongoing global pandemic and an increasing fear of climate change, resulting in a generation rooted in activism (Chen et Al., 2020; Konstantinou & Jones, 2022). As such, Gen-Z is composed of socially-conscious consumers who view their choice in brands as, "an extension of who they are and what they stand for (Chen et. al, 2020, p. ??)."

Though winning over Gen-Z can be a challenge for marketers, brands who get it right will gain stakeholders with high levels of brand enthusiasm. According to a study among Gen-Z consumers from IBM, while only 36% of consumers reported feeling a strong connection to any brand, 66% said that once they find a brand they like, they will continue to buy for a long time, and 60% said they were happy to be associated with their favorite brand (Cheung et al., 2017). Numerous studies, one of the major factors in appealing to Gen-Z is authenticity (Chen et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2017; Konstantinou & Jones, 2022).

Authenticity & Gen Z

Growing up in a digital world has provided Gen-Z with consistent access to platforms for self-expression and interaction in real time, meaning that Gen-Z craves the ability to feel seen and be heard (Chen et al., 2020). As a result, they expect brands to listen to them and interact with them in ways that make them feel understood and allow opportunities for contributing to a brand as consumers (Cheung et al., 2017). Authenticity is key to reaching this generation. Furthermore, Gen-Z's tech savviness has given them a toolkit to differentiate between true and false claims from brands (Cheung et al., 2017).

If a brand is perceived as inauthentic by their Gen-Z audience, the stances they take may backfire as Gen-Z will not hesitate to recognize and call-out brands that fail to engage with marginalized groups in authentic ways (Wolff, 2022). Simultaneously, brands must balance a need for authenticity with a call to embrace the unique identities and diversity within this cohort (Wolff, 2022).

Though research on perceived organizational authenticity (POA) among Gen-Z and the LGBTQ+ community is limited, advertising scholars have found that, "the nuances – various identities and lived experiences – of the LGBTQ subculture are often not reflected in the communication with and about this group" (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020, p. 111). Lim et al.'s (2022) work on the topic includes development of a scale to measure five dimensions of POA in LGBTQ communication that includes credibility, integrity, symbolism, continuity, and representativeness (Lim, et. al, 2022). These scholars noted that marginalized groups may have higher levels of skepticism towards cause-related advertising, though their research also found that increasing stakeholders' POA can decrease skepticism (Lim, et. al, 2022).

Many brands who attempt to appeal to the LGBTQ+ community by use of LGBTQ+ symbolism in ads such as the production and sale of rainbow merchandise and corporate donations are criticized for "rainbow washing", or commodification of LGBTQ+ liberation that benefits corporate profits rather than LGBTQ+ communities (Abad-Santos, 2018; Sung, 2021). A stark example is when Gilead, a pharmaceutical company that produces HIV-preventative medication, Truvada, sponsored New York City's Pride celebration. Though the sponsorship painted a public image of support for the LGBTQ+ community, Gilead refused to release the patent for its life-saving medication, leaving it unaffordable for many uninsured Americans, and disproportionately affecting many people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Abad-Santos, 2018).

It's not always easy for consumers to determine the corporate motive behind messages of support for the LGBTQ+ community, as it can be a nuanced issue with several pros and cons. While LGBTQ+ visibility in advertising is often considered a good thing, critics note that increased representation means increased commodification and increased social and legislative backlash (Clements, 2018). For example, Absolut Vodka and Bud Light both released ads predominantly featuring cisgender narratives of transgender experiences, contributing to a nationwide conversation around LGBTQ+ issues without offering tangible support for legislative threats to LGBTQ+ protections (Clements, 2018).

In the case of ads like those from Absolut and Bud Light, what the advertisers perceive as representation is often perceived by consumers as misrepresentation or exploitation (Clements, 2018). A 2019 study found that while 64% of adults support

LGBTQ+ visibility in advertising, 72% of LGBTQ+ audiences feel that the way they're represented in advertising is tokenistic (Corner, 2019). When brands miss the mark on representation, they can do more social harm than good. Campaigns that lack diversity, enforce stereotypes and/or aren't backed by ethical corporate practices are often perceived as inauthentic attempts to garner LGBTQ+ dollars rather than push meaningful social change (Watson, 2019).

II. SIGNALLING THEORY

Signalling theory provides guidance in helping marketers understand the relationship between their branding and consumers' choice-making processes, as it aims to explain how individuals "make choices armed with incomplete and asymmetrically distributed information" (Bergh, et al., 2014, p. 1334). Research through the corporate lens of signalling theory finds that corporate storytelling can lead consumers to create strong emotional bonds with a brand, rendering it crucial to corporate survival (Brighton, et al., 2021). Effective corporate storytelling may offer soft information to help consumers weigh the costs and benefits of choosing a brand when they are stuck in a separating equilibrium.

A separating equilibrium consists when the following four elements are present (Bergh, et. al, 2014):

1. An information problem: This occurs when a decision-maker has incomplete, asymmetrically distributed information between potential candidates, or signallers. Candidates use signals to represent unobservable qualities that may be valued by the decision-maker. In an information problem, both parties are

susceptible to unfavorable selection, as the decision-maker is taking a risk in trusting a signal and the candidates are taking a risk when choosing to invest in a signal without knowing how it will be received.

2. Signal costs: Higher signal costs generally translate to higher quality signals that are difficult to imitate, resulting in credible signalling that reduces an information problem. Low-quality candidates may have to invest disproportionately more than high-quality candidates in order to send a high-quality, credible signal to the decision maker.

3. Pareto optimizing solutions: A discrepancy in signalling costs can allow decision-makers to choose based on a candidate's signal. A Pareto optimizing logic allows both parties to draw expectations and rewards associated with the cost of signals-if an agreement is made, it's considered Pareto optimal if an improvement for one candidate means simultaneous degradation for one or more other parties (Gibbons, 1992).

4. Signal confirmation: This refers to whether or not the quality of a signal meets the assumed expectations after an agreement is reached.

This theory can be applied to the decision-making between advertisers and consumers. However, it's important to note that the way in which cost and quality are defined depends on the context of what values are held by shoppers, as well as the nature of selling propositions communicated by advertisers.

For example, several studies have looked at how consumers perceive "green-marketing", or the sale of products that are marketed as environmentally-friendly using

the appropriate marketing signals. Results show that an increase in product efficacy, or one form of signal confirmation, led to more favorable consumer opinions on green products (Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008). Put simply, if a shopper can trust a product to do what it promises, they will likely have a more positive opinion of it. As consumers have become more cognizant of the social and environmental impact of brands they choose (Chen, et al., 2020), the act of "greenwashing" has become an issue of concern. Similar to rainbow-washing, greenwashing is the act of using "eco-friendly" signals without paying the signal cost of engaging in eco-friendly practices.

Brands who greenwash are likely to damage their consumers' trust and hurt their brand image, though the impact can extend to increasing consumers' skepticism towards products marketed as "eco-friendly" in general (Schena, et al., 2015). This form of false signalling is considered a penalty cost, or a negative form of feedback that substitutes for signal costs (Gammoh, et al., 2006). Actively engaging in eco-friendly practices could be equally-costly for either brand, but the penalty costs associated with greenwashing create a separating equilibrium between brands who *are* eco-friendly and brands who only *say* they are eco-friendly (Bergh et al., 2014).

Another form of separating equilibrium applicable to advertising is handicap signalling (Deb, 2013). Handicap signalling occurs when signal costs are equal for both high- and low-quality signallers, though high-quality signallers are more likely to absorb the cost without harming their profit (Rao, et al., 1999). For example, critics of rainbow washing have called out Gap, Inc. for pledging to donate $50,000 to GLAAD, a nonprofit LGBTQ+ organization, stating, "$50,000 isn't much, considering the net sales of Gap

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Inc. in 2020 totaled $13.8 billion (Gap Inc.). Surely Gap could afford to give more than a measly $50,000" (Hom & Hoff, 2021). If a lower-quality signaller, or a clothing company making less than $13.8 billion in net sales, pledged to donate $50,000 to GLAAD, there would be a separating equilibrium due to Gap's ability to put out an equivalent signal with a less burdensome "handicap" (Bergh et al., 2014).

An additional way to create a separating equilibrium through advertising is via an informed third party in the signalling process who can absorb the costs of signalling (Sanders & Boivie, 2004) while providing a sense of legitimacy or prestige (Pollock et al., 2004) to the receiver while backing the signaller (Bruton et al., 2009). The informed third party is responsible for most of the signalling costs in these scenarios, as they're putting their social capital and reputation at risk (Bergh et al., 2014). For example, midwestern gas station chain, Kum & Go, recently partnered with TikTok influencer, Kyle Scheele, to promote a cause-related influencer meal with Scheele. The TikToker posted a series of videos that went viral without disclosure of a sponsorship, portraying the incident as a social-stunt-turned-brand-deal. Scheele's followers were largely unaware that this was a premeditated partnership until Kum & Go's director of brand marketing told Adweek that the chain chose to partner with Scheele to use his "brand of humor" to "build a story…that people would be interested in" (Alanis, 2021, para. 10). Scheele upset several fans, damaging his reputation and largely absorbing the cost of Kum & Go's attempt at signalling through high-value storytelling (Alanis, 2021). In this scenario, Scheele had an authentic brand of humor that provided the quality signal Kum & Go needed to sell a high-value story to its audience. A separating equilibrium occurred because the receivers, or audience, believed that Scheele had a unique sense of

authenticity that he would not invest in low-quality stories.

Thus proven by the diverse ways in which signalling theory serves as a basis for creating advertising that influences consumer decision-making, there are several contexts in which value may be assigned to brands, products, and corporate messaging. Now more than ever, the value upon which consumer and brand bonds are built is extending beyond the product itself and shifting more towards shared purpose (Skiles, 2020).

III. CORPORATE ACTIVISM & GOODWILL

As research on signalling theory suggests, one way that brands can create deep emotional bonds with consumers is by demonstrating shared purpose-driven values with their audience. A 2021 study from Peter Novelli found that consumers are 62% more likely to purchase from purpose-driven brands, with 72% stating they'd be more likely to be loyal to a purpose-driven brand (Peters, 2021). Though taking a stance on social issues is risky for brands (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016), research among the next big wave of consumers suggests that brands will need to engage in activism that aligns with consumers' beliefs. (Chen et al., 2020; Skiles, 2020)

Corporate activism has been defined as, "a company's adoption of a non-neutral stance on an issue that is controversial, politically sensitive, divisive, and arousing strong emotions" (Atanga et al., 2022, pg 2). A brand's activism may be shown through their donations, messaging, and changes to products or services (Moorman, 2020). An important facet of corporate activism is the concept of corporate goodwill, which speaks to consumer believability regarding the brand's core intentions and ethos (McCroskey &

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Teven, 1999; Villagra et. al, 2022). Research on this relationship has suggested that corporate goodwill is positively related to corporate activism. The more credible a company's intentions are perceived to be, the more positively their activism will be received by consumers (Villagra et. al, 2022). For example, the CEO of Patagonia recently gave away his $3 billion company to a nonprofit with the intention of fighting climate change. This move has been overwhelmingly well-received by the general public and several communications professionals, largely because it was aligned with the corporate intentions and ethics that Patagonia has demonstrated throughout the years (Ragavan, 2022).

Corporate communication scholars have developed a scale to measure corporate activism, separating it into three constructs (Villagra et al., 2022):

I. Social activism: the degree to which a corporation promotes social causes through their initiatives.

II. Social political activism: when corporations declare clear, public positions on political ideology.

III. Reactionary political activism: the act of corporations adopting initiatives to counteract a lack of competence from public institutions, such as governments.

Villagra et al.'s (2022) work on corporate activism found that perception of authenticity acts as an antecedent of corporate activism, suggesting that companies must consider whether their consumers will perceive acts of purpose as genuine or not prior to engaging in any form of corporate activism (Villagra et al., 2022). This creates a unique challenge for brands looking to market to Gen-Z. Not meeting this generation's expectation for brands to act purposefully on sociopolitical issues could result in a lack of

growth and consumer loyalty (Wolff, 2020), yet consumers who oppose the stance a brand takes on sociopolitical issues are likely to react negatively, potentially resulting in negative press and/or a loss of sales (Atanga et al., 2022). The challenge of winning over Gen-Z consumers, specifically those who identify as LGBTQ+, requires advertisers to have a deep understanding of this generation's perception of authenticity; a concept that affects consumer attitudes towards methods of corporate signalling such as corporate activism.

RQ1: What are Gen-Z's attitudes surrounding corporate activism?

IV. PERCIEVED ORGANIZATIONAL AUTHENTICITY

A 2015 study laid a framework for established perception of authenticity as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)" (Morhart et al., 2015). The results of Morhart's study expanded upon defining those four dimensions as follows:

- Continuity refers to branding that maintains a consistent image that transcends trends. Brands that embody continuity not only stick to their heritage, but show promise of staying throughout the future.

- Credibility refers to branding that is honest and therefore, builds consumer trust. Brands that embody credibility stick to their promises, deliver on claims and are perceived as being transparent with their audience.

- Integrity deals with the degree to which consumers feel that a brand's actions are in alignment with core values and intentions. Brands that uphold integrity are

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perceived to act ethically, keeping consumer front-of-mind.

- Symbolism refers to branding that resonates with consumers' own personal core values and beliefs. Brands that make use of symbolism connect with audiences in a manner that allows consumers to take pride in their identity and include the brand as a part of who they are as individuals.

While the concept of authenticity may be static throughout several demographics, subcultures within historically-marginalized groups tend to hold different standards for authentic communication from brands (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). Ciszek and Lim conducted qualitative research with LGBTQ+ individuals that built upon Morhart's scale for measuring POA. These studies focused on POA among LGBTQ+ audiences, finding that this community may hold higher levels of skepticism towards corporate messages of support. It was noted that LGBTQ+ audiences, "do not simply perceive authenticity from a cursory symbolic function of a rainbow overlayed image on social media; rather, they demand more integrated and continuous efforts that reflect their values and the issues they face as sexual and gender minorities" (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405). Though the four dimensions of POA held true for LGBTQ+ individuals, they were defined in unique ways among this demographic and resulted in findings that suggest adding skepticism and representativeness as factors in POA (Ciszek & Lim, 2021).

Defining authenticity for LGBTQ+ consumers means defining authenticity through the lens of LGBTQ+ experiences. For LGBTQ+ consumers, continuity extends beyond maintaining a consistent brand image, but maintaining consistent support of the LGBTQ+ community year-round (Ciszek & Lim, 2021). For example, consumers that

value continuity may look for brands that have a proven track record of contributing to charitable organizations within the LGBTQ+ community, rather than brands who only make donations during pride month. When it comes to integrity, LGBTQ+ audiences are more likely to gravitate towards brands with core values that align with the values of their LGBTQ+ stakeholders (Ciszek & Lim, 2021). Respondents in Ciszek & Lim's study defined credibility as a brand's believability regarding pro-LGBTQ+ advertising. One participant provided Chick-Fil-A as an example, suggesting that, "credibility does not necessarily relate to whether an organization's position regarding sexual and gender minorities is agreeable to all publics; instead, credibility reflects an alignment with brand values" (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 401). The research also found that using symbolism to authentically appeal to LGBTQ+ publics requires a deep understanding of these audiences to strive for visibility and acknowledgement without the pitfall of virtue signaling and rainbow washing.

Respondents in Ciszek & Lim's study amplified a need for more holistic representation in advertising to better connect with people within the LGBTQ+ community. They emphasized the problematic prevalence of advertisements that reduce LGBTQ+ identities to just a love life, in addition to portrayal through a lens of whitewashing, ageism, and cisnormativity (Ciszek & Lim, 2021). Participants called for advertising that incorporates multifaceted representation, including their family life, career paths, hobbies, and pastimes. This lack of representation was echoed by the results of a UK study conducted by YouGov and commissioned by The Gay Times & Kamarama. While 64% of all respondents in that study supported LGBTQ+ representation in ads, 72% of LGBTQ+-identifying respondents felt that the way they are

represented in advertising is tokenistic (Corner, 2019).

In addition to tokenistic representation, extant research has called attention to erasure of certain gender and sexual identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Several respondents in Ciszek & Lim's study noted insufficient inclusion of bisexual and transgender perspective in ads (Ciszek & Lim, 2021). Another form of erasure noted by a critic of rainbow washing brought attention to the concept that commodifying LGBTQ+ identities during pride month flattens out the layered identities and issues within the community into a single, vague notion of "awareness," prioritizing campaigns that are easily consumable on a mass scale rather than campaigns that authentically resonate with LGBTQ+ individuals (Abad-Santos, 2018).

These studies on POA among LGBTQ+ audiences found that this community may hold higher levels of skepticism towards corporate messages of support, and that LGBTQ+ audiences do not, "perceive authenticity from a cursory symbolic function of a rainbow overlayed image on social media; rather, they demand more integrated and continuous efforts that reflect their values and the issues they face as sexual and gender minorities" (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405). The importance of particular dimensions of POA among LGBTQ+ participants in Ciszek & Lim's research led us to our second research question:

RQ2: What dimensions of POA are important to Gen-Z's LGBTQ+ community?

V. IDENTITIES

Existing research among LGBTQ+ demographics has found that a sense of

belonging within the community is one of the positive aspects of identifying as LGBTQ+ (Riggle & Mohr, 2015; Riggle et al., 2014). Health communication scholars have researched the effect of LGBTQ+ identity and community connection in relation to effectiveness of LGBTQ+ focused tobacco education advertising. They found that, "an LGBT individual's identity development and community connection influence their receptivity to LGBT tobacco education advertising" (Navarro et al., 2019, p. 476). In addition, their study found differences among the way members of different sexual and gender minority groups reported their LGBTQ+ identity affirmation, centrality and identity with the LGBTQ+ community (Navarro et al., 2019).

These findings highlight the importance of advertising that is both broad and focused, suggesting that advertisers view sexual and gender minorities as separate, unique groups rather than a singular community (Navarro et al., 2019). Consequently, individuals who report a stronger sense of connection to the LGBTQ+ community may report higher levels of purchase intent and positive attitudes towards brands that openly support and represent the LGBTQ+ community in their messaging. Additionally, differences among perception of authenticity among subsets of gender and sexual-orientation identities may be present. Our study will expand upon this field of research on individuals' identification with the LGBTQ+ community and its impact on effectiveness of advertising. We will measure how consumers' connection to the LGBTQ+ community correlates with their attitudes and purchase intent towards brands with and without LGBTQ+ focused advertising.

Previous research among people who identify as allies to the LGBTQ+ community have found that allies are motivated to confront those in power and/or

generally do what they believe is right, based on principles of justice and equality (Russell, 2011). Heterosexual people who do not participate in LGBTQ+ activism but identify as passive allies see themselves as support and respect the LGBTQ+ community, due to their own moral standards (Grzanka et al., 2015). To address this gap in the research, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: How does allyship affect Gen-Z consumers' perception of authenticity regarding LGBTQ+ communication from brands?

VI. METHODOLOGY

Procedure

Snowball sampling via social media, QR codes, and other forms of mediated communication to recruit a sample of 210 US adults aged 18 to 45. Those outside of the Gen-Z age range were removed from the sample, resulting in a final sample of 204. Upon accessing the survey and providing consent, participants indicated their level of agreement with statements related to ad skepticism, CSA, LGBTQ+ organizations, and provided demographic information.

Sample

A total of 210 participants were recruited via our purposive snowball sampling. 4 participants who failed to complete the study were excluded as well as 2 that fell beyond the age range, resulting in 204 total participants who completed the study. The sample consisted of 29.1% of participants identifying as LGBTQ+ and 70.9% identifying as non-LGBTQ compared to a national average of 21% (Porterfield, 2022). A majority

of participants identified as heterosexual, (n=137, 68.8%), followed by bisexual (n=37, 18.6%), followed by gay, (n=12, 6.0%), other (n= 12, 6.0%) and asexual, (n=1, 0.5%).

Age ranged from 18 to 26 (M =21.18, SD =1.80). The majority of respondents notated education level as some college or trade school. A majority of the participants indicated their gender as cis female (n= 130, 65.0%), followed by cis male (n= 53, 26.5%), genderqueer/gendernonconforming, (n= 10, 5.0%), a different identity, (n=4, 2.0%), trans female, (n= 2, 1.0%) and trans male, (n=1, 0.5%). Participants' reported ethnicities were white (n= 100, 50%), Black or African American (n= 15, 7.5%), Asian(n= 4, 2.0%), Hispanic (n= 71, 35.5%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, (n=2, 1.0%), American Indian or Alaska Native, (n=1, 0.5%) and others (n= 7, 3.5%) More information about participant demographics is detailed in Tables 1a-1c.

Table 1a

Allyship Status	N	%
Yes	125	59.5
No	25	14.1%
Maybe	27	15.3%

Note: Only respondents who answered "no" to being a member of the LGBTQ+ community were prompted with this question. Respondents who answered "maybe" were grouped in with those who answered "no" in our analysis of results where allyship status was a factor.

Table 1b

Education Level	N	%
High school or GED	34	17.1%
Some college	79	39.7%
2 year degree	44	22.1%
4 year degree	39	19.6%
Some grad school	1	0.5%
Graduate degree	2	1.0%

Table 1c

Political ideology	N	%
Very conservative	4	1.9%
Conservative	26	12.6%
Moderate	81	39.3%
Liberal	59	28.6%
Very liberal	36	17.5%

Measures

Perception of authenticity scales established by extant communication research

(Ciszek, 2020; Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Ciszek & Pounders, 2020; Lim et al., 2022; Morhart

et al., 2015) were adapted to generate a set of items to measure POA among corporate

messaging surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. Specifically, Lim et al's (2022) 20 item scale

were altered to reflect the five dimensions of POA in LGBTQ+ communication as

follows: credibility (four items), integrity (five items), symbolism (four items) and

continuity (three items), and representativeness (four items) (M = 4.10, Cronbach's Alpha

= .98).

To measure attitudes towards corporate goodwill and corporate activism, extant

CSA research (Villagra et. al, 2022), specifically using Villagra et al.'s 14 item scale that

reflects four dimensions of attitudes towards corporate activism and goodwill as follows:

corporate social activism (3 items), corporate political activism (3 items), corporate

reactionary activism (4 items), and corporate goodwill (4 items) (M = 3.60, Cronbach's

Alpha = .88) was used.

To measure consumer's perceptions of their willingness to support LGBTQ+

businesses, Pan and Meng (2018)'s items were adapted to include scale items that reflect

purchase intent with questions such as, *I will seek out products to purchase from brands*

that support LGBTQ+, I will pay more for products/brands that support LGBTQ+ even

though I could buy similar products for a cheaper price, (M = 4.33, Cronbach's Alpha =

.96).

Perception of advertising skepticism was evaluated using Obermiller and

Spangenberg's (1998) nine-items on a six-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly

agree). The following statements were used: *We can depend on getting the truth in most*

advertising, advertising's aim is to inform the consumer, I believe advertising is

informative, advertising is generally truthful, advertising is a reliable source of

information about the quality and performance of products, advertising is truth well told,

in general advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised, I feel I've

been accurately informed after viewing most advertisements, and *most advertising*

provides consumers with essential information (M = 3.74, Cronbach's alpha = .91).

VII. Results

The first research question assessed Gen-Z's attitudes towards corporate

activism. Descriptive statistics revealed overwhelming support for corporate social

activism (M = 4.33, SD = 1.16), followed by corporate reactionary activism (M = 3.51,

SD = .87). Corporate political activism had the least support with (M = 3.10, SD = 1.30).

Of all the corporate activism items, *large companies should take care of citizens* had the

largest support (M = 4.50, SD = 1.29) while *large companies should get involved in*

politics had the lowest (M = 2.87, SD = 1.40). Thus, RQ1 was answered. Gen-Z generally

supports corporate social activism, while support for corporate political activism and

corporate reactionary activism are more heavily dependent on consumers' identities and

beliefs regarding the issues at hand.

The second research question examined the level of importance Gen-Z places on

each of the five POA dimensions. Respondents evaluated integrity (M = 4.23, SD = .92)

as the most important followed by credibility (M = 4.17, SD = .90), representativeness

(M = 4.14, SD = .94), symbolism (M = 4.05, SD = .92), and finally continuity (M = 3.84,

SD = .92).

To answer the third research question regarding LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ

stakeholder differences, an ANOVA was used to examine if there are differences

between LGBTQ+ consumers, non-LGBTQ+ ally consumers and non-LGBTQ+ non-ally

consumers in evaluating LGBTQ communication.

(Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way ANOVA)

Measure	LGBTQ+		Ally		NonAlly		$F(2, 191)$
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Continuity	4.26[a]	0.66	3.91[b]	0.89	3.15[c]	0.88	23.192[**]
Credibility	4.64[a]	0.58	4.3[b]	0.74	3.3[c]	0.97	41.85**
Integrity	4.7[a]	0.5	4.38[b]	0.76	3.32[c]	0.99	44.69**
Symbolism	4.39[a]	0.67	4.22[a]	0.79	3.23[b]	0.99	30.04**
Representativeness	4.61[a]	0.54	4.27[b]	0.84	3.28[c]	0.96	37.20**
Goodwill	3.31	1.18	3.67	1.15	3.7	0.99	2.17
Corporate Social Activism	4.67[a]	0.89	4.49[a]	1.15	3.61[b]	1.21	13.83**
Corporate Political Activism	3.46[a]	1.17	3.03[ab]	1.31	2.8[b]	1.36	3.6*
Corporate Reactionary Activism	3.8[a]	0.73	3.58[a]	0.8	3.01[b]	0.95	13.04**
Ad Skepticism	3.55[a]	0.83	3.73[ab]	0.76	3.98[b]	0.79	3.89*
Behavior	5.16[a]	0.69	4.41[b]	0.94	3.16[c]	1.23	55.9**

Note: Means with different subscripts in the row represent significant differences

*between groups. ** is significant at the .001 level, * is significant at the .05 level.*

Results reveal that there are significant differences across nearly all measures of

perceived organizational authenticity & skepticism between LGBTQ+ respondents and

non LGBTQ+ respondents except for corporate goodwill [F(2,191) = 2.17, p = .12]. Post

hoc comparisons using Games Howell test indicated significant differences between

groups, see Table 1.

  LGBTQ+ and ally respondents would score significantly higher on corporate

social activism, though it is important to note that even non-LGBTQ+, non-ally respondents would score favorable regarding corporate social activism.

All groups felt significantly less supportive of corporate political and corporate reactionary activism than corporate social activism, though LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ allies still leaned supportive of corporate reactionary activism. It's important to note a significant difference between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ allies on corporate reactionary activism, Table 1.

The only group that leaned supportive of corporate political activism was LGBTQ+. Though there is a significant difference between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ non-allies, on CPA, non-LGBTQ+ allies did not differ significantly from either group. Overall, corporate political activism was the lowest-scored type of corporate activism among the three.

It's important to recognize that skepticism is measured such that a lower score for skepticism notates higher skepticism. As hypothesized due to extant research, LGBTQ+ respondents are significantly more skeptical than non-LGBTQ+, non-ally respondents. However, we are unable to accurately compare these results to skepticism studies among non-Gen-Z respondents, so further research is needed to determine whether Gen-Z generally has higher levels of skepticism across the board.

While LGBTQ+ respondents scored all five measures of POA highly, credibility, integrity and representativeness were scored the highest. It's important to notate that these scores are significantly higher than scores notated by respondents who are not LGBTQ+.

However, there were not significant differences across LGBTQ+ participants

and ally respondents regarding symbolism. Additionally, allies did not differ significantly from LGBTQ+ respondents and non-ally respondents regarding skepticism.

Another aspect of RQ3 we wanted to measure was how identity affects purchase intent for brands that support LGBTQ+ issues. We found that all groups differed significantly from one other on this measure, proving our hypothesis that LGBTQ+ and Non-LGBTQ+ allies would be significantly more likely to seek out and purchase from brands that publicly support the LGBTQ+ community.

Thus, RQ3 was answered. While all three groups differed significantly on this measure, it's important to note that even Non-LGBTQ+, Non-allies had a mean score of 3.16 on a 6-point scale. While this isn't a high mean score, it is not a low one, suggesting that supporting LGBTQ+ issues may not have a significant negative impact on cash-flow from consumers who do not support LGBTQ+ issues themselves. It will, however, have a significantly positive impact on cash flow from audiences who do support LGBTQ+ issues and are members of the community themselves.

V1I. Discussion

We aimed to set a foundation for studying perceived organizational authenticity among Gen-Z, focusing on Gen-Z's LGBTQ+ community. Gen-Z is strikingly different from other generations, especially regarding their decisions as consumers (Chen et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2017), so we recognize the importance of studying how they perceive authentic messaging and make decisions when it comes to LGBTQ+ branding

and corporate activism.

Through quantitative online questionnaires, we confirmed that Lim et al.'s (2022) research on POA holds among Gen-Z. In our study, LGBTQ+ respondents reported higher levels of skepticism, valued representativeness at a higher rate than non-LGBTQ+ respondents, and valued measures of POA that translate to continuous, tangible corporate action (integrity, credibility) at higher rates than non-LGBTQ+ respondents. These findings highlight the notion that brands must go beyond mere symbolism and continuity in their advertising. In other words, brands must make an effort to represent the multifaceted identities of their LGBTQ+ stakeholders, and it must be in line with their consumers' core values, rooted in their corporate core values, and done beyond the month of June in order to be believable and meaningful to consumers.

Our findings regarding behavior and purchase intent among Gen-Z found that brands who are able to connect with the LGBTQ+ community through authentic messages of support will see monetary benefits and enthusiastic consumers. Our findings show that while LGBTQ+ individuals and allies are significantly more likely to seek out brands that support the LGBTQ+ community, pro-LGBTQ+ messaging does not appear likely to affect the spending habits of those who do not consider themselves allies.

Our findings suggest that brands should prioritize corporate social activism, over political and reactionary activism, as it resonated the most with all three groups of our respondents. That being said, LGBTQ+ respondents still notated higher levels of support for corporate political and reactionary activism, suggesting that they value brands who take a stand when it is necessary to uphold corporate goodwill. Extant research touched on the importance of corporations taking a stand when LGBTQ+ rights are under attack

in the political sphere (Clements, 2018, Abad-Santos, 2018) and this research confirms that Gen-Z's LGBTQ+ community believes that brands should step in when the government fails to uphold LGBTQ+ rights.

The multitude of significant differences we found in answers between LGBTQ+ respondents and non-LGBTQ+ ally respondents highlights the need for holistic research and representation within the advertising industry. Though ally respondents answered similarly for symbolism, they differed significantly on measures such as representativeness and integrity, suggesting that those measures might not be adequately understood and/or valued by individuals who lack the lived experiences that come along with being an LGBTQ+ person. In order to successfully represent and connect with Gen-Z's LGBTQ+ community, advertisers must center their experiences within marketing strategies and creative executions.

IX. Limitations and future studies

We recognize the importance of our research along with the discussions it has opened up, though we cannot do so without recognizing its many limitations.

Due to our funding and recruiting limitations, most of our respondents were recruited from the Texas State University community and surrounding geographical locations. Future research should aim to survey respondents nationwide, beyond the realm of a population that is mostly college students. Additionally, studies should aim to survey a larger number of LGBTQ+ respondents to measure for differences within the LGBTQ+ community.

Another limitation of this study is the self-selection nature of our questionnaire.

Responses were limited to respondents' own biases, potentially making a difference among measures of identity such as allyship. The concept of allyship can be rather nuanced in practice, ranging from tangible activism to mere moral support, and our study did not allow room for such nuances. Future studies may consider implementing definitions, or observing consumer behavior to avoid respondent biases.

Additionally, our study only considered the consumer audience perspective of this issue. While consumers are an important part of the equation, this is an issue that requires industry input for a holistic understanding. Future research should look to include viewpoints from those who work in all sectors of marketing, including members of Gen-Z who are balancing their personal identity with their professional identity in crafting authentic messaging.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

Perception of Authenticity (5pt. scale)

It is important for me that when a brand is advertising to the LGBTQ+ community that
they are:

Continuity

1) A brand within the LGBTQ community

34

2) A brand that survives trends in the LGBTQ community

3) A brand with a timeless commitment to the LGBTQ community

Credibility

4) A brand that is honest to the LGBTQ community

5) A brand that is endeavoring its promise to the LGBTQ community

6) A brand that accomplishes its promise the LGBTQ community

Integrity

7) A brand that gives back to the LGBTQ community

8) A brand with moral principles that are important to LGBTQ community

9) A brand true to a set of values of the LGBTQ community

10) A brand that cares about its LGBTQ consumers

11) A brand that cares about its the LGBTQ employees

Symbolism

12) A brand that adds meaning to LGBTQ people's lives

13) A brand that connects LGBTQ people with what is really important

14) A brand that connects LGBTQ people with their real selves

15) A brand that reflects important values LGBTQ people care about

Representativeness

16) A brand that represents a diversity of LGBTQ people

17) A brand that represents individual LGBTQ people

18) A brand that connects marginalized LGBTQ people

19) A brand that reflects the changes within LGBTQ community

Skepticism (6pt. Scale)

Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

1. We can depend on getting the truth in most advertising.

2. Advertising's aim is to inform the consumer

3. I believe advertising is informative

4. Advertising is generally truthful

5. Advertising is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance

   of products

6. Advertising is truth well told

7. In general, advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised

8. I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most advertisements

9. Most advertising provides consumers with essential information

Goodwill (6pt scale)

Rate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements:

- Large companies take care of citizens

- Large companies have the citizen as their core interest

- Large companies care about citizens

- Large companies care and understand social issues

Corporate social activism (6pt scale)

Rate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements:

- Large companies should defend social positions

- Large companies have an ethical obligation to promote social change

- Large companies and governments should participate equally in solving social

  problems

Corporate political activism (6pt scale)

Rate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements:

- I believe that large companies should position themselves politically

- Large companies should get involved in politics

- CEOs of major companies have an obligation to express publicly their political

  preferences.

Corporate reactionary activism (6pt scale)

Rate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements:

- When the government tries to pass an unfair or little ethical law, big business

  should try to stop it

- When polarization hits corporations: the moderating effect of political ideology

  on corporate activism

- Large companies should take initiatives against bad governments or bad

politicians

- When the government does not solve citizens' problems, large companies should take the initiative

Perceived effectiveness of ads (navarro scale) (6pt scale)

Rate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements about your perceptions of businesses that support LGBTQ+:

1. I will say positive things about brands that support LGBTQ+ to my friends

2. I will recommend LGBTQ+ supportive brands to my friends

3. I will pay more for products/brands that support LGBTQ+ even though I could buy similar products for a cheaper price

4. I will seek out products to purchase from brands that support LGBTQ+

5. I will look for brands/products that are identified as LGBTQ+ supporters

6. I feel good about myself when I support brands that support LGBTQ+

7. I believe brands should promote that they support LGBTQ+

8. It is likely I would buy a brand that supports LGBTQ+

9. I would consider purchasing brands that support LGBTQ+

10. I would plan on buying brands that support LGBTQ+