

The Impact of Rainbow-Washing on Consumers' Emotional Responses

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ABSTRACT,

Nowadays, LGBTQ+ representation in advertisements is common. However, these advertisements are not always perceived as sincere. Some people believe that LGBTQ+ advertising is mostly done for external reasons such as gaining profits. The public support shown for LGBTQ+ communities shown by businesses while privately acting and engaging in contradictory practices is called rainbow-washing. This research focuses on the impact of perceiving rainbow-washing on consumers' emotional responses. In order to examine this, a survey was conducted among 134 participants, in which respondents had to watch an advertisement that features LGBTQ+ representation and select the main emotion they felt. The Geneva Emotional Wheel was used to measure emotions. It was found that perceiving rainbow-washing leads to lower emotional valence. Individuals who perceived rainbow-washing were more prone to experience feelings of boredom and disgust compared to respondents who did not perceive rainbow-washing. Those consumers perceived consistently positive reactions, including hope and happiness. Moreover, it has been found that LGBTQ+ identity alone does not significantly predict emotional valence, which suggests that perception is the key driver of emotional responses in this context. This study expands research in consumer behaviour and ethical marketing. For brands, it means that they should prioritise genuine inclusion to avoid negative consumer reactions and use transparent marketing strategies to protect their reputation.

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Keywords

Rainbow-washing, LGBTQ+ advertising, emotions, marketing authenticity, ethical marketing, inclusive marketing

During the preparation of this work, the author used Copilot in order to generate ideas and check grammar and spelling. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, brands have increasingly incorporated LGBTQ+ representation in their advertising (Johns et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2024; Schopper et al., 2025), appearing as allies of the community. LGBTQ+ refers to people from sexual and gender minority groups, including identities such as lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex (Phillips II et al., 2023). While LGBTQ+ advertising may have positive effects such as increased representation, public awareness, and acceptance, there is also criticism toward companies using this type of advertising. This criticism is mostly concerning the perceived insincerity of these advertisements (Schopper et al., 2025) and aligns with the concept of 'rainbow-washing', which is a marketing technique used to attract LGBTQ+ consumers while not genuinely investing in their community (Johns et al., 2022). Rainbow-washing accusations can lead to negative brand evaluations (Schopper et al., 2025), making it essential for brands to address such concerns.

Furthermore, emotions play a crucial role in marketing as they shape consumer perceptions, influence purchasing decisions, and drive brand loyalty. Understanding the emotions consumers experience when viewing LGBTQ+ advertisements perceived as rainbow-washing can help brands rebuild consumer trust, refine their inclusivity efforts, and enhance brand loyalty (Aeron & Rahman, 2024).

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is not a wide availability of research on LGBTQ+ marketing, which leads to many gaps and research opportunities. While some studies focus on LGBTQ+ consumer perspectives and others analyse general consumer reactions, little research has directly compared these two groups in the context of rainbow-washing. Moreover, many studies have a primary focus on homosexual consumers, leaving out other LGBTQ+ consumers and non-LGBTQ+ consumers as a whole (Berisha et al., 2015).

Additionally, research on emotional responses in this context is limited. While research has found extensive emotional responses such as increased trust, scepticism, and brand avoidance (Paklapas et al., 2024), there is still a need to examine underlying reasons for these responses (Mücksch et al., 2024). This research fills this gap by analysing specific emotional responses to LGBTQ+ marketing using the Geneva Emotional Wheel (Scherer, 2005), an established model used to measure emotions.

The aim is to analyse how LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ consumers emotionally respond to perceived rainbow-washing. Emotional responses will be measured using the Geneva Emotional Wheel (Scherer, 2005) in a survey, and will be compared between groups of consumers to identify differences. Understanding consumers' emotions can help businesses review their LGBTQ+ marketing campaigns and engage in more authentic practices.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

How does rainbow-washing influence consumers' emotional responses?

1.3 ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

This research is significant in multiple ways. By analysing how consumers emotionally respond to rainbow-washing, this research contributes to the fields of consumer behaviour, ethical marketing, and corporate social responsibility. In general, studies on LGBTQ+ marketing are limited, but even fewer research measures specific emotional reactions with the use of an established model such as the Geneva Emotional Wheel (Scherer, 2005). Prior studies have mainly researched LGBTQ+ perspectives or general reactions to rainbow-washing (Berisha et

al., 2015; Suomio, 2021). This research's findings will enhance academic discussions on marketing authenticity and consumer trust, with a focus on inclusivity and corporate social responsibility.

1.4 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Moreover, several practical contributions are also provided. This research is relevant for businesses because it helps them avoid backlash from rainbow-washing and guides them in creating genuine inclusive marketing. It encourages them to integrate inclusion into their long-term corporate social responsibility strategies, rather than using inclusion purely as a marketing tool to gain short-term profit. Secondly, this research aims to give a voice to consumers who may feel misled by certain marketing campaigns, and to protect them from misleading marketing practices in the future. Highlighting consumer experiences may lead to higher transparency in marketing. Finally, this study addresses broader social and ethical implications by focusing on corporate social responsibility. Besides, it supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 and 12. SDG 10, focused on reducing inequalities, aligns with this research as it promotes inclusivity and representation in marketing, and SDG 12 highlights the importance of responsible corporate behaviour through ethical practices (United Nations, 2023).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 CORE CONCEPTS

To establish a strong theoretical foundation, this section defines the core concepts related to this research: rainbow-washing, emotional responses, and consumer identity.

Rainbow-washing has been defined as "when businesses publicly show support for and represent the LGBTQ+ community while privately acting and engaging in contradictory practices" (Rowe, 2023, p. 2). LGBTQ+ representation and rights keep expanding, leading to brands implementing their support into marketing. This is often in an effort to gain profit and popularity (Foret, 2023). Therefore, according to Foret (2023) and Rowe (2023), rainbow-washing is problematic because businesses do not genuinely engage in supportive practices toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Next, emotional responses will be measured using the Geneva Emotional Wheel (Scherer, 2005), an established model used to measure emotions. Emotions are valenced responses directed at specific objects, people, or events (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). Emotional responses are relevant to marketing as they can influence aspects of information processing, such as encoding and retrieval of information, processing of information, and judgments (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Understanding emotional reactions to rainbow-washing is essential for assessing how consumers perceive brands' engagement with LGBTQ+ representation.

Furthermore, identity is a subjective construct made up of various attributes, such as age, gender, nationality, and ethnicity, that differentiate individuals from each other (Qin et al., 2025). For the purpose of this research, consumer identity will be split into LGBTQ+ consumers and non-LGBTQ+ consumers. As explained previously, LGBTQ+ refers to people from sexual and gender minority groups (Phillips II et al., 2023). This distinction is crucial in order to make a comparative analysis of emotional responses to rainbow-washing between these two consumer groups.

2.2 THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Building on those core variables, this section introduces Affect Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory as key theories for the theoretical framework.

Next, Self-Categorisation Theory explains that people categorise themselves and others into groups, which affects their perceptions and actions based on group memberships. It states that social and personal identity can simultaneously influence behaviour and cognition. When a particular group identity becomes salient, it may shape interpretation. In the case of rainbow-washing, LGBTQ+ consumers may interpret an advertisement differently or experience different emotional responses due to the activation of their social identity (Treppe & Loy, 2017).

This research contains three variables. First of all, the independent variable is the perceived rainbow-washing as experienced by consumers. This variable influences the dependent variable, consumers' emotional responses. These are the reactions that will be measured. Finally, the moderating variable is consumer identity. More specifically, this is about whether or not the consumer identifies as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. This research will examine if and how consumer identity influences the relationship between rainbow-washing and emotional responses. This research model is visualised in Figure 1 below.



The Geneva Emotional Wheel (Scherer, 2005) plays an essential role in this research, as it will be used to measure the dependent variable, emotional responses. In order to assure the best fit between this tool and this research, an adjusted version of the prototype version by Scherer (2005) has been created (Figure 2). The biggest adjustment is the removal of the intensity layers for the sake of simplicity and clarity, which reduces complexity, making the survey easier for participants to understand and respond to. Besides, this study focuses on different types of emotional responses, not on the intensity of these responses. Additionally, the original prototype version combined shame and guilt. For clarity reasons the adjusted version has simplified this by removing “shame”. In short, this wheel categorises sixteen specific emotions along two dimensions. Horizontally, the emotions are categorised based on valence, which represents whether an emotion is negative or positive. The vertical axis represents the degree of power an individual feels over a situation that triggers an emotion (Sacharin et al., 2012).



According to Paklapas et al. (2024), scepticism arises from the perception that LGBTQ+ symbols are being used for commercial purposes and without genuine support for the community. They also state that scepticism deters support for a brand. That could point to consumers' perception of rainbow-washing influencing their emotions in a negative way, with scepticism as an example. However, there is still a lack in research about a wider range of emotional responses and in comparisons between two groups (Berisha et al., 2015).

Paklapas et al. (2024) refers to Affect Theory to explain the emotional engagement shaping consumers' perceptions. According to this theory, emotions determine how humans behave (Frank & Wilson, 2020). Therefore, they can influence how marketing messages are received by consumers. In their research, Paklapas et al. (2024) compared homosexual and heterosexual consumers and argued that the homosexual group may have a higher sensitivity and emotional connection to LGBTQ+ issues, which can lead to a critical evaluation of a marketing campaign. Heterosexual consumers perceived campaigns as moderately sincere, which could stem from less emotional engagement with the issue.

H2: LGBTQ+ consumers respond more negatively to perceived rainbow-washing than non-LGBTQ+ consumers.

Table 1. Items.

Construct	Item	Response Scale	Source
Rainbow-Washing	I'm sure that LGBTQ+ advertisements deceive consumers.	Binary, 1 = yes and 0 = no	(Braga Junior et al., 2019)
Emotional Responses	Which of the following emotions did you experience while viewing this advertisement? Select all that apply. Pride, elation, happiness, satisfaction, relief, hope, interest, surprise, anxiety, sadness, boredom, guilt, disgust, contempt, hostility, anger.	Binary, 1 = selected and 0 = not selected	(Scherer, 2005)
Consumer Identity	I identify as LGBTQ+.	Binary, 1 = yes and 0 = no	(Worthen, 2022)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLING

The main method used for this research is a quantitative survey, since it is low cost and practical for larger samples (Ponto, 2015). This way a large number of responses can be analysed efficiently. The survey is conducted with Qualtrics, an online survey tool, for reasons such as accessibility and data protection. In the analysis, the target groups of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ consumers will be compared. The initial aim was a sample size of 100, with 50 people from each group in order to make a meaningful comparison. Ultimately, 134 responses were collected, out of which 61 respondents identify as LGBTQ+, 69 respondents do not identify as LGBTQ+, and 4 respondents preferred not to disclose this information. Considering practical limitations such as time constraints, convenience sampling has been used. This is a non-probability technique where participants are selected based on their ease of access (Golzar et al., 2022). The survey has been distributed online through several channels including WhatsApp group chats, Instagram stories, Reddit communities and a Discord server.

3.2 MEASUREMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

Emotional responses are measured using the Geneva Emotional Wheel (Figure 2) to capture nuanced reactions. To facilitate statistical analyses, each emotion is assigned a numerical valence score, ranging from -4 to 4. These scores are completely based on the arrangement of emotions in the Geneva Emotional Wheel. For example, disgust and guilt are the most on the negative side of the valence scale in the model, meaning they both received a score of -4. To give some more examples, this gives sadness a score of -2, pride a score of 1, and hope a score of 3.

The survey that was conducted can be found as Appendix A in the appendices and consists of multiple sections. Before starting the survey, each respondent is informed about the survey and their rights and is asked for consent to participate and use their data. The survey ended immediately for all respondents who did not consent. Their responses are not used in any way, and they are also not included in the reported total number of responses. All other respondents are directed to the first section. In the first section, some demographic information is required, including age, gender, and whether or not the participant identifies as LGBTQ+. Next, participants are shown an advertisement featuring LGBTQ+ representation. After watching the advertisement, participants select the main emotion they experienced while watching it. The advertisement that is used in the survey is one that was used by Sprite in the year 2019 (santobuenosaires, 2019). Finally, respondents are asked whether or not they believe that the advertisement “overstates or exaggerates its support for LGBTQ+ communities beyond its actual commitment”, which is translated into their perception of rainbow-washing for the analysis. Lastly it is important to mention that this survey has received ethical approval by the Humanities & Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Twente, which ensures compliance with ethical standards regarding participant rights and data protection.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected with the survey is analysed using R and RStudio. This research aims to examine how perceiving rainbow-washing influences consumers' emotional responses and how LGBTQ+ identity influences those responses. The analysis includes an examination of the relationship between LGBTQ+ identity, valenced emotional reactions, and perception of rainbow-washing, while also taking into account age and gender. Welch's two-sample t-test is conducted to assess group differences. Moreover, linear regression analyses explore influences of the demographic variables on emotional valence, determining which factors have a significant impact. Boxplots visualise findings from the t-tests and linear regression analyses.

4. RESULTS

This study includes 134 participants who provided responses about their emotional reactions and perceptions of an LGBTQ+ advertisement through an online survey. The sample included individuals from various age groups, gender identities, and LGBTQ+ identities. Respondents were selected using convenience sampling, which means that they were chosen based on accessibility and willingness to participate rather than random selection.

4.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

Although respondents represented a diverse range of age groups, the vast majority of them were under the age of 34. The largest age category is 18 – 24 years old, comprising about 63% of the total sample, followed by the categories under 18 (15%) and 25 – 34 years old (14%). Only about 8% of respondents are 35 years old or older, and there are no respondents of 55 years old or older. Next, gender identity is a more diverse category as about 41% identifies as male, 39% as female, 12% as non-binary, and 6% as a different gender. The other 2% preferred not to disclose their gender. Moreover, in terms of LGBTQ+ identity it was the aim to reach an approximately equal representation of 50% for each group. This goal has been achieved successfully. About 46% of respondents identifies as LGBTQ+, while about 51% does not. A small percentage (3%) preferred not to disclose this information.

4.2 GENERAL RAINBOW-WASHING PERCEPTIONS

To assess perceptions of rainbow-washing, respondents were asked whether they believed that the LGBTQ+ advertisement they viewed “overstates or exaggerates its support for LGBTQ+ communities beyond its actual commitment.” Individuals who answered “yes” were classified as perceiving the advertisement as rainbow-washing, and those who answered “no” were classified as not perceiving rainbow-washing. In total, 73% of respondents perceived the advertisement as rainbow-washing and 27% did not.

As shown in Figure 3, when comparing LGBTQ+ participants to non-LGBTQ+ participants on whether or not they perceived rainbow-washing, there is no significant difference between groups. Among LGBTQ+ respondents, approximately 72% viewed the advertisement as rainbow-washing, while the other 28% did not. Similarly, about 74% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents perceived rainbow-washing, and 26% did not.

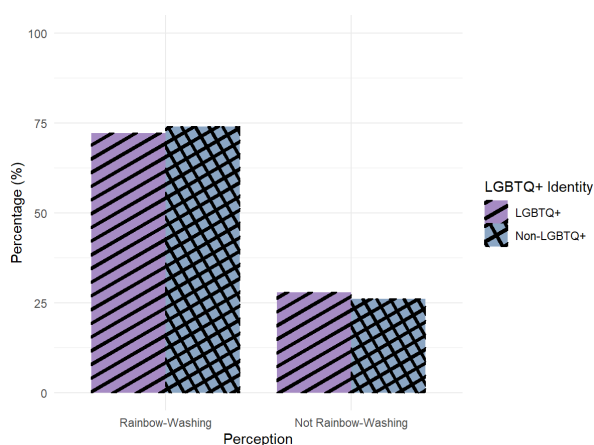


Figure 3. Rainbow-Washing Perceptions by LGBTQ+ Identity.

4.3 EMOTIONAL VALENCE IN REACTIONS TO PERCEIVED RAINBOW-WASHING

This section examines the relationship between consumers’ emotional responses to LGBTQ+ advertising and their perception of rainbow-washing. For this analysis, a combination of a t-test, linear regression, and boxplot will be used. The main goal is to assess whether individuals who perceive rainbow-washing have significantly different emotional responses in terms of valence.

First of all, Welch’s two-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in emotional valence between respondents. Findings of $t = -4.96$ and $p < 0.001$ indicate a highly statistically significant difference between these groups. The group of individuals who perceived rainbow-washing has a mean of -0.28 , which means they generally felt slightly negative toward the advertisement. In contrast, the group of individuals who did not perceive rainbow-washing has a mean of 2.03 , meaning they felt moderately positive about the advertisement. This indicates that perceiving rainbow-washing has a negative relationship with emotional valence. The 95% confidence interval of -3.23 to -1.38 further supports the reliability of this difference, as it also suggests that rainbow-washing perception is associated with more negative emotional responses.

Secondly, a linear regression analysis was performed to further analyse this relationship, while also controlling for age, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity. Similar to the t-test, the results indicate that perceiving an advertisement as rainbow-washing significantly lowers emotional valence with an estimate of -2.16 and $p < 0.001$. This indicates that rainbow-washing is a strong predictor of negative emotional responses. Additionally, gender and LGBTQ+ identity influence emotional valence, though to a lesser extent. For example, male respondents reported lower emotional valence compared to females with an estimate of -1.53 and p -value of 0.002 . Similarly, non-LGBTQ+ respondents showed lower emotional valence than LGBTQ+ respondents (estimate = -1.11 and $p = 0.04$), which indicates that identity beyond gender may also influence perceptions. However, rainbow-washing perception remains the most influential factor, as it demonstrates a stronger effect than these demographic predictors. In general, the R^2 of 0.335 and $p < 0.001$ suggest that the overall model explains 33.5% of the variance in emotional responses. This means that while rainbow-washing perception is a key factor, additional influences not included in this analysis may further contribute to valenced emotional reactions. Furthermore, the F-statistic being 5.59 with $p < 0.001$ confirms that the predictors collectively explain emotional valence significantly better than chance, reinforcing the reliability of these findings.

Thirdly, a boxplot (Figure 4) provides a visual representation of the distribution of emotional valence scores between respondents who perceived rainbow-washing and those who did not. The interquartile range, which represents the middle 50% of the data, is considerably larger for the group of people who perceived the advertisement to be rainbow-washing than for those who did not. This indicates that emotional responses among individuals perceiving rainbow-washing are far more variable, with a greater spread between negative and positive reactions, while those who did not perceive rainbow-washing show more consistent reactions. In fact, the group that did not perceive rainbow-washing shows consistently positive reactions, as their entire boxplot, excluding a few outliers, falls within the range of positive valence scores. In contrast, while the rainbow-washing group also has a positive median, this group shows many more negative emotional reactions to the advertisement.

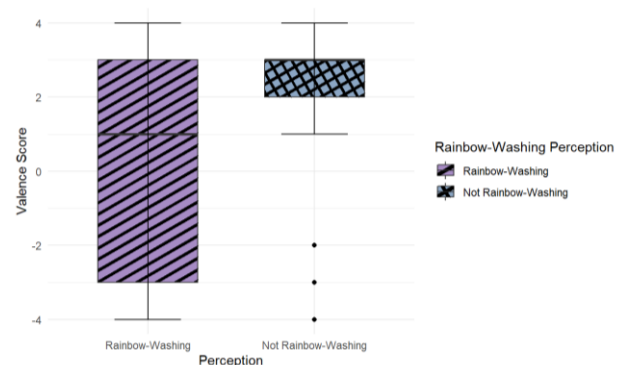


Figure 4. Emotional Valence by Perception of Rainbow-Washing.

In summary, this combination of a t-test, linear regression analysis, and boxplot provides the clear picture that perceptions of rainbow-washing significantly shape emotional responses to LGBTQ+ advertising. People who perceive rainbow-washing tend to show more varied and negative emotional reactions compared to those who do not perceive rainbow-washing, who generally react more positive.

4.4 EMOTIONAL VALENCE IN RAINBOW-WASHING PERCEIVING CONSUMERS

Zooming in on rainbow-washing perceiving consumers, the following section explores how LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ consumers emotionally respond to perceived rainbow-washing, focusing on the valence of their reactions. The aim is to discover whether there is a significant difference in emotional reactions between consumers who perceived rainbow-washing in the two groups. This means that only individuals listed as perceiving rainbow-washing were included in the analysis, which is a total of 98 respondents. Similar to the previous section, a t-test, linear regression, and boxplot will be used to provide a clear analysis.

First, Welch's two-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in emotional valence scores between the two groups. The t-value of 3.18 indicates a significant difference in emotional valence scores, and the p-value of 0.002 suggests that this difference is statistically significant and unlikely to be due to random chance. LGBTQ+ consumers reported a mean valence score of 0.66, which indicates neutral to slightly positive emotional responses, while non-LGBTQ+ consumers had a lower mean valence score of -1.10, indicating stronger negative reactions. These results point to LGBTQ+ consumers feeling more positive about perceived rainbow-washing advertisements compared to non-LGBTQ+ consumers. The 95% confidence interval between 0.66 to 2.85 suggests that the true difference in mean valence scores between groups of consumers likely falls within this range. It supports the idea that emotional valence differs significantly between the two groups.

Secondly, a linear regression analysis was performed to examine how LGBTQ+ identity, age, and gender predict emotional valence in consumers who perceive rainbow-washing. The R² of 0.230 indicates that the model explained 23.0% of the variance in valence scores, suggesting that these demographic factors collectively contribute to differences in emotional reactions. The p-value of 0.0059 confirms that the overall model is statistically significant, meaning that the predictors influence valence scores and that this is unlikely to be due to random chance. Moreover, while LGBTQ+ identity shows a negative estimate of -0.94, suggesting that non-LGBTQ+ consumers experience lower emotional valence on average, this effect is not statistically significant due to the p-value of 0.1995. The F-statistic of 2.82 with a p-value of 0.0059 confirms that the predictors collectively explain emotional valence better than chance, though additional factors not included in this model may further shape consumer reactions. Overall, these results suggest that LGBTQ+ identity alone may not strongly predict emotional valence to perceived rainbow-washing.

Furthermore, the boxplot in Figure 5 further illustrates the emotional valence scores of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ consumers who perceived an advertisement as rainbow-washing. First of all, the interquartile range is wider for non-LGBTQ+ respondents, indicating a greater variability in emotional responses with scores ranging from strongly negative to moderately positive. However, the boxplot for LGBTQ+ respondents also shows a large interquartile range. Comparing the medians reveals a significant difference between groups. The median for the LGBTQ+ group is notably higher, indicating generally more positive reactions, whereas the median for non-LGBTQ+ consumers is much lower, indicating more negative responses. Despite this significant difference in medians, the minimum and maximum values of both groups indicate the presence of extreme emotional responses. These findings

visually support the findings from the t-test and linear regression analysis.



Figure 5. Emotional Valence by LGBTQ+ Identity in Perceived Rainbow-Washing.

In summary, the combination of a t-test, linear regression analysis and boxplot provides a clear picture of how LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ consumers emotionally respond to perceived rainbow-washing. LGBTQ+ consumers tend to show more positive emotional reactions, while non-LGBTQ+ consumers generally respond more negatively. However, as found in the linear regression analysis, this relationship may not be statistically significant, suggesting that while identity plays a role, additional factors likely contribute to variations in emotional valence.

4.5 SPECIFIC EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO PERCEIVED RAINBOW-WASHING

To get more specific, Figure 6 demonstrates a heatmap of specific emotional responses. It reveals a contrast between the two groups of perception that is in line with previous findings. Hope and happiness, which both have an assigned valence score of 3, are clearly the most frequently reported emotions in the not rainbow-washing group. For the other group, boredom and disgust are the most occurring emotions, which have valence scores of respectively -3 and -4. Additionally, the rainbow-washing group demonstrates a wider range of emotions, meaning responses are more spread. Furthermore, the total row shows that with both groups combined, happiness and hope are the most frequently reported emotions, followed by boredom and disgust. These emotions were also the most occurring emotions in the analysis per group, suggesting that these four are the most significant.

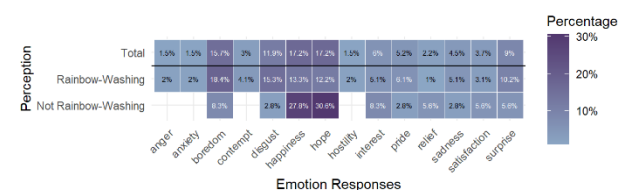


Figure 6. Emotion Frequency (% by Group) in Rainbow-Washing Perception.

5. DISCUSSION

This research examined how perceiving rainbow-washing influences consumers' emotional responses and explored the role of LGBTQ+ identity in this context. In short, it has been found that perceptions of rainbow-washing significantly shape emotional responses to LGBTQ+ advertising.

To get more specific, perceiving rainbow-washing negatively impacts emotional responses, as it relates to lower emotional valence scores. Additional factors, such as gender and LGBTQ+ identity may also influence emotional valence, but to a lesser extent. People who did not perceive rainbow-washing felt a lot more positive about the advertisement, and this positivity was even overwhelmingly consistent. The question of why people who perceive rainbow-washing would feel more negatively about the advertisement can be approached through Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory explores how individuals interpret events that occur in their lives and attempts to explain the processes involved in everyday explanations. Attributions are internal and external processes of interpreting behaviours (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Based on this theory, consumers may experience these negative emotional responses because of how they attribute the brand's motives. When they assess whether a brand's use of LGBTQ+ representation is authentic, they may attribute the reason behind the representation to be external rather than internal. This means that consumers may believe it is inauthentic marketing and mostly done to improve profits instead of genuinely supporting the community. This refers back to the theoretical framework, in which was already discussed that according to Foret (2023) LGBTQ+ advertising is often done in an effort to gain profit and popularity, and businesses may not always genuinely engage in supportive practices toward the LGBTQ+ community. Manusov & Spitzberg (2008) state that "every comment a person makes and every action in which a person engages can be subject to attributional analysis" (p. 40) and that the outcome of it can have "potentially significant implications for the nature of how one responds to another's actions" (p.41). This explains that consumers who perceive rainbow-washing may feel more negatively about the advertisement as their attributional analysis leads them to interpret the advertisement as inauthentic, which shapes the nature of their emotional response.

Secondly, it has been found that individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ feel more positive toward perceived rainbow-washing. However, while the t-test confirms a statistically significant difference in valence scores, the linear regression analysis suggests that identity alone does not strongly predict emotional reactions. In the theoretical framework, Self-Categorisation Theory was introduced to explain that people's perceptions and actions are influenced by how they categorise themselves and others into groups (Treppe & Loy, 2017). It was expected that LGBTQ+ consumers might experience different emotional responses because of the activation of their social identity. However, it turns out that identity is not a strong predictor of emotional valence in rainbow-washing perceiving individuals. This raises questions concerning why this is the case and what other factors might be influential to emotional responses. This can be explained using Appraisal Theory, which explains how an individual's emotions are influenced by assessing their environment. This assessment concerns determining whether events align with a person's goals, needs, beliefs, or anything else that is of importance to them (Moors et al., 2013). In the context of this research that could mean that emotional responses are driven by how someone appraises the advertisement. That means that identity alone does not strongly influence emotional valence, but rather how individuals interpret the advertisement in relation to their personal concerns. Since both the LGBTQ+ group and the non-LGBTQ+ group perceive rainbow-washing, their emotional responses are similar, suggesting perception is a stronger factor than identity. Therefore, Appraisal Theory suggests that perception of rainbow-washing might actually be a key factor in shaping emotional valence. This is in line with the previous analysis, as a significant difference in emotional

valence between individuals who perceived rainbow-washing and those who did not has already been found.

Finally, though not explicitly discussed prior to the data analysis, the results section includes a small section about specific emotional responses to perceived rainbow-washing. The findings reveal that individuals who did not perceive rainbow-washing mostly experience hope and happiness, while individuals who do perceive rainbow-washing commonly experience boredom and disgust. This is a significant contrast, as the former emotions are strongly positive, while the latter are strongly negative. This supports both prior analyses since they both pointed to perception of rainbow-washing being an essential predictor in emotional responses. Both analyses found that perceiving rainbow-washing generally lowers emotional valence, which is also the case when looking at specific emotions.

Referring back to the first findings, 73% of all individuals reported that they believed the advertisement overstates or exaggerates its support for LGBTQ+ communities beyond its actual commitment. This suggests that nearly three-quarters of individuals perceive the advertisement as rainbow-washing, which is associated with lower emotional valence. These findings highlight a widespread perception of inauthenticity. As mentioned in the introduction, emotions shape consumer perceptions, influence purchasing decisions, and drive brand loyalty (Aeron & Rahman, 2024). This means that the negative emotions stemming from perceptions of rainbow-washing can impact several marketing aspects essential to brand success.

5.1 CONCLUSION

This research set out to answer the question: "How does rainbow-washing influence consumers' emotional responses?" This question has now been answered through a survey and analyses of the collected data. In short, it has been discovered that the perception of rainbow-washing relates to lower emotional valence, which means that consumers tend to feel more negatively toward advertisements they perceive as showing insincere LGBTQ+ representation. More specifically, individuals who did not perceive rainbow-washing experienced much more consistently positive emotions, whereas those who did experience rainbow-washing showed more varied responses. Additionally, consumers who perceive rainbow-washing may feel feelings of boredom and disgust, as opposed to those who do not, who tend to feel happiness and hope. To conclude, these results offer valuable insights into consumers' emotional responses to LGBTQ+ representation in advertising, emphasising the impact of perceived insincerity.

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

These findings have important implications for businesses and marketers, particularly those engaging in LGBTQ+ advertising. Since perceptions of rainbow-washing are linked to lower emotional valence and in some cases even feelings of disgust, inauthentic marketing should be avoided. Brands should prioritise genuine support for LGBTQ+ communities and transparency to avoid negative emotions that can impact their success. Consumers should perceive internal reasons behind the representation rather than external ones. To achieve this, brands could ensure their LGBTQ+ representation aligns with meaningful actions, such as consistent advocacy and corporate inclusivity, rather than simple gestures.

5.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Furthermore, the findings also have theoretical implications, contributing to research in consumer behaviour, ethical marketing, and corporate social responsibility. They support Attribution Theory by demonstrating that consumers who

perceive rainbow-washing tend to feel more negatively toward such advertisements, likely because of their attribution of LGBTQ+ representation to external motives. In contrast, they partially challenge Self-Categorisation Theory as they suggest that perception of rainbow-washing more strongly influences emotional responses than group identity. This implies that, in this context, individual assessments of authenticity seem to be more important than purely identity-driven reactions. Additionally, this supports Appraisal Theory, as these findings show that perception plays a crucial role in shaping emotional responses.

5.4 LIMITATIONS

Although valuable findings have been discovered, this research also contains some limitations. First of all, the data sample mainly included younger respondents, as only a few respondents were over the age of 35. This means that the findings may not fully represent older generations' views. Secondly, convenience sampling in general may not be the most representative, as participants were gathered through accessible online channels, which means that it does not fully represent the entire consumer population. Respondents may have similar backgrounds, which could affect the results. Thirdly, since respondents had to select the main emotion, they felt themselves, self-reporting bias may have influenced the accuracy of their responses, as respondents may have misinterpreted their feelings, exaggerated their reactions, or conformed to perceived social norms (Koller et al., 2023). Additionally, while participants reported their emotions, they did not have room for explanations of why they felt that way. Therefore, underlying reasons behind these emotional responses remain unclear. Moreover, the survey only featured a single advertisement, which means that the results may not be applicable to every type of LGBTQ+ marketing. A wider range of advertisements could provide clearer insights. Furthermore, uncertainty in consumer behaviour remains. An individual feeling disgust toward rainbow-washing may not always lead to them avoiding purchasing from that brand. In summary, this research has several limitations that highlight relevant areas for future research.

5.5 FUTURE RESEARCH

The above discussed limitations lead to future research opportunities that could elaborate on the results from this research. First of all, a better sampling strategy could lead to stronger insights. For example, more people from older generations, different backgrounds, or using random sampling could lead to new insights. Moreover, using qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups can help moving beyond self-reporting bias and could facilitate letting people explain why they feel a certain way. Furthermore, testing multiple advertisements or different types of marketing campaigns could show new differences. For example, different brands or industries might receive different emotional responses. Additionally, the exact influence of emotions on aspects such as purchasing decisions could be further explored. Although this research has found that perceived rainbow-washing leads to negative emotions, it is unclear what the actual impact of these emotions is on consumer behaviour. These future research opportunities could deepen understandings of emotional responses to rainbow-washing and ultimately help brands create more authentic and meaningful marketing campaigns.

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7. APPENDICES

7.1 APPENDIX A: SURVEY EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO LGBTQ+ ADVERTISING

Dear respondent,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. My name is Caitlin van Leeuwen, and for my Bachelor's thesis in International Business Administration I am doing research on emotional responses to LGBTQ+ advertising.

This survey explores how people emotionally respond to LGBTQ+ representation in advertising. Your insights will help provide a deeper understanding of how different audiences experience and interpret these advertisements.

There are no right or wrong answers and every response is welcome. Your participation is completely voluntary and your responses will remain anonymous. You can withdraw at any moment. By completing this survey you consent to your answers being used for this research. This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at

[REDACTED]

I truly appreciate your time and contribution to this research.

‘Do you consent to participating in this survey?

☐ Yes, I consent

☐ No, I do not consent

*What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18 - 24
- ☐ 25 - 34
- ☐ 35 - 44
- ☐ 45 - 54
- ☐ 55 - 64
- ☐ 65 or older
- ☐ Prefer not to say

*What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Gender not listed here
- ☐ Prefer not to say

This survey examines how people, both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community, emotionally respond to LGBTQ+ advertising.

The LGBTQ+ community includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities. It refers to people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual (*being sexually or romantically attracted to someone of a different gender*) or whose gender identity is not cisgender (*having a gender identity that is traditionally associated with their sex assigned at birth*).

*Do you identify as LGBTQ+?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please watch this advertisement. After watching, select the emotion that you felt most strongly.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L_8yeYVlBo

*Which of the following emotions did you experience while viewing this advertisement? Pick the one that you felt the strongest. (Select one)

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ☐ Relief | ☐ Satisfaction |
| ☐ Hope | ☐ Happiness |
| ☐ Interest | ☐ Elation |
| ☐ Surprise | ☐ Pride |
| ☐ Anxiety | ☐ Anger |
| ☐ Sadness | ☐ Hostility |
| ☐ Boredom | ☐ Contempt |
| ☐ Guilt | ☐ Disgust |

*In my view, this advertisement overstates or exaggerates its support for LGBTQ+ communities beyond its actual commitment.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No