

“OMG. That’s so gay!”

A qualitative analysis of people’s perception of homoeroticism in advertising
depending on their sexual orientation.

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[Abstract]

The present research addresses the relationship between individuals' sexual orientation and their perception of homoeroticism in advertising, which, according to previous research appeal more to lesbian, gay, bisexual and other queer people. In four focus groups, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and gay participants expressed their views on ten adverts presenting a homoerotic appeal. All participants acknowledged homoeroticism the same way, the results, however, showed a certain difference of perception between LGBTI+ and heterosexual people. Heterosexuals were less engaged on the topic of homoeroticism, pointing out diverse aspects while LGBTI+ participants were mostly focused on the erotic aspect, asking for more eroticism and LGBTI+ representation. The importance of social representation for individuals, especially for lesbians, gays and bisexuals, is thus studied.

Keywords: young adults, homoeroticism, sexual orientation, perception, advertising, social representation

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Anne-Mette Hermans, all participants of the focus groups, my girlfriend, my friends and my mom.

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1.1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Remember your 15-year-old self, hanging posters of your favourite artists on the walls of your bedroom? The need for identification is crucial for any child, teenager, or even adult. Role models are a source of inspiration and empowerment. Research has long emphasised the need for, especially, minorities to have social representations as "exemplars of achievement" (Gibson and Cordova, 1999). Looking for equal rights and/or integration in society, minorities need leaders to be inspired. For example, Hacker (1951) found that women, as a minority group, needed role models to empower them. Much later, Gilardi (2015) explains that politics needs more female role models to encourage new generations of women in politics. Like women in politics, other minorities, such as homosexuals and bisexuals, also need representations as exemplars, to be inspired and feel accepted. For homosexuals and bisexuals, finding role models with which they could identify is complicated, as there is a lack of representation (Kaiser, 2017).

The concepts of homosexuality and bisexuality must be defined to understand the topic of this thesis. Homosexuality is explained with the term 'homo' which signifies 'same' (Homo-, n.d.). Homosexuals are individuals who are romantically or sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Bisexuality denotes people who are romantically or sexually attracted to people of the same - and the opposite sex (Bisexual, n.d.).

In western societies today, where people - especially younger generations - support progressive ideas and social reforms, homosexuality has started to become more accepted and thus more visible. There is a desire to depict diversity through diverse social representations (TMW, 2017). Media, and to some extent advertising, has an important role when it comes to representing society in all aspects (Tortajada-Giménez, Araüna-Baró and Martínez-Martínez, 2013). Fortunately, advertising has seen a small but definite open-minded evolution. Black, white, skinny, curvy, young, old, disabled, heterosexual and homosexual models are step by step displayed more. Series, movies, or advertisements are depicting more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or any type of queer people (TMW, 2017). Brands have encompassed this spirit of change to strategically target potential future buyers. Moreover, studies have indicated that gay men are generally quite wealthy (Roth, n.d), mainly due to the fact they do not raise kids and thus have more money to spend on leisure. Thus, they form an attractive target audience for brands. Therefore, thinking in terms of profits - and a possible will to represent diversity - companies have progressively started to target LGBTI+ people and to involve them in their various communication campaigns and advertisements.

Nonetheless, it is not necessary to display blatant homosexual images of, for example, two models kissing, to potentially arousing the interest of LGBTI+ individuals. Brands use an alternative;

namely ‘homoeroticism’. Homoeroticism - derived from ‘homo’ and ‘eroticism’ - is the use of sexually suggestive symbols or allusions between same-sex individuals (“Homoeroticism”, n.d.). In other words, unlike eroticism, ‘homoeroticism’ denotes a sexual attraction between either two men or two women. Homoeroticism refers to the notion of desire only, while homosexuality refers to a sexual or romantic relationship. The complete definition of the concept ‘homoeroticism’ will be detailed in Chapter 2.

Before to be applied in advertising, the term ‘homoeroticism’ has been used in different fields in the past centuries. Back in the Roman period, Latin literature shows plenty of references to homoeroticism. From astrological texts to love spells or medical writing, sexual relationships between members of the same-sex were prevalent (Hallett, 1992). Julius Caesar, for example, had both female and male lovers (Garber, 2013). Fourteen centuries later, with Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, homoerotic appreciation of the male body was further depicted (Zöllner, 2000; Norton, n.d.). ‘Homoeroticism’, as defined in this research project, could already be identified in the two artists’ poems and paintings.

The concept of homoeroticism has not always been clearly defined and has been explained differently by various authors. Ferenczi (1915), in his book ‘On the nosology of male homosexuality (Homoeroticism)’ defined homoeroticism the same way this study does, as the notion of desire between two people of the same gender. In 1984, Bronski was the first one to define homoeroticism as a marketing technique. He explains that “advertising appeals can be made explicitly [...], or implicitly, through the use of coded representation which appears innocuous to heterosexual readers but can be interpreted as ‘gay’ by bisexual, lesbian and gay readers, a strategy known as ‘gay-window advertising’” (Bronski, 1984, p. 187). Gay-window advertising is, in other words, the use of homoerotic appeals in advertising to target LGBTI+ individuals - while avoiding heterosexuals to acknowledge and recognise it. To conclude, ‘homoeroticism’ has been depicted in art, literature and advertising for centuries, however, how is it used in contemporary advertising?

Since the start of the 21st century, three different authors have focused on ‘homoeroticism’ in advertising, Chapter 2.3 focuses on their research. First, Sender (1999) studied the relation between people’s sexual orientation and their responses to homoeroticism in adverts. She used focus groups to analyse different perceptions of homoeroticism, and - unsurprisingly - discovered that homosexual and bisexual participants tended to make a ‘gay reading’ of homoerotic adverts more often than heterosexuals. This ‘gay reading’ means that as Sender (1999) indicated “gay audiences recognize the codes as ‘gay’ and can thus identify with these images”, while straight participants do not. Thus, Sender was the first to analyse the tendency of gay readings in homoerotic adverts. Two years later, Reichert (2001) also focused on homoeroticism in advertising but with a different approach. Reichert (2001) analyzed female and male perceptions of female to female homoerotic images in adverts. He observed through focus groups that almost without exception, males identified the homoerotic tension immediately while females perceived it, but later. Reichert (2001) did not consider the sexual orientation of respondents. Six years later,

Oakenfull (2007) also tried to understand how gays and lesbians react to homoerotic content in advertising, depending on the degree to which they identify as gay and their gender. These three authors thus explored homoerotic adverts and their perception in the last twenty years.

However, no recent studies have been done on homoeroticism in advertising. As explained, in 1999, Sender used focus groups to consider people's different perceptions of homoeroticism depending on their sexual identifications. In 2001, Reichert analysed people's reaction to female homoerotic adverts and in 2007, Oakenfull studied LGBTI+ reactions to homoerotic adverts. However, these projects were conducted over a decade ago. Studying the question of homoeroticism in advertising, and its perception among individuals with different gender and sexual orientations is socially relevant. Indeed, the question of acceptance and integration of LGBTI+ individuals in society is the subject of lively debates. Since the rise of religious societies (Winckles, 2013), homosexuality was considered a sin, and later, a mental illness (Zijlstra, 2014). Fortunately, today's opinion toward LGBTI+ people is changing ("Views on homosexuality, gender and religion", 2018). People tend to be more open-minded on the topic, hence, conducting such research in 2019 can be seen as a good update of the current societal picture. This topic has been proven relevant to scientific research in the past, however, previous studies are old and revising them seems appropriate. The general opinion has evolved toward acceptance and 'normalisation' of homosexuality, especially the opinion of younger generations, such as millennials. This research hence focuses on young adults' perceptions, living in a western country with a certain level of education.

A question now arises, namely, how do young adults aged 18-25 with different sexual orientations perceive homoeroticism in advertising? In order to answer this question, this project presents the results of four focus groups with heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual young adults aged 18-25 who live in Rotterdam. After displaying ten homoerotic adverts to the participants, this research analysed their differences of perception depending on their sexual orientation. The selection of adverts and the process of the focus groups is explained in Chapter 3. Based on previous research, it is expected that heterosexual participants would have a tendency not to see any homoerotic appeal while lesbians, gays and bisexuals would (Sender, 1999). This assumption links with the importance of social representation for individuals' development and explains why LGBTI+ people perceive homosexual allure in homoerotic adverts while heterosexuals do not. This study is interdisciplinary since the importance of social representation is cultural and societal, and the role of homoeroticism in advertising and its possible benefit for brands links this study to the business sector.

1.2 Structure

In order to answer the research question, Chapter 2 consists of an explanation of the theory of social representation, an extended definition of the main concept of this thesis 'homoeroticism' and mostly, an in-depth review of previous studies about homoeroticism in advertising. In doing so, first, the

need for people to identify with someone else, also known as social representation theory is explained. Second, the main concept of the research questions ‘homoeroticism’ is fully defined with various definitions from various researchers. A description of how homoeroticism has been used before and why the term ‘homoeroticism’ has been chosen for this thesis. Lastly, Chapter 2 elaborates on the main pieces of literature studied, which represent the foundations of this project. There will be Sender (1999) whose focus group methodology has inspired this thesis. Reichert (2001) who studied the appreciation of lesbian homoerotic images and, Oakenfull (2007) whose business viewpoint brings another perspective to the topic of homoeroticism in advertising. This in-depth review is realized in order to gather the existing knowledge on the topic of homoeroticism in advertising, and hence, be able to draw a comparison.

Chapter 3 explains the qualitative methods chosen and gives a reason for the presentation of stimulus materials in focus groups. This chapter is divided into four sub-sections. First, the preparation of the focus group, which consisted of finding ten adverts displaying a homoerotic appeal and, 25 participants divided into four groups. Second, an explanation of the process of the focus groups including how participants have been divided and how focus groups have been conducted. Next, the methodology of the analysis is given, from creating codes and themes to the deductive an inductive process. Lastly, the question of ethics toward participants is raised. Chapter 4 presents all findings and reveal that sexual orientation has, overall, not influenced people acknowledgment of homoeroticism. However, people's perception has differed in certain cases between LGBTI+ and heterosexual participants. For instance, LGBTI+ participants complained of the lack of eroticism in the adverts shown, compared to what they can see in advertising when heterosexual couples are displayed. This chapter discusses all the contrasts of perception. Chapter 5 reveals the limitations of this research and gives recommendations for further research.

2. Theory and previous research

In this chapter, theory and previous studies relevant to this thesis are explored. The main theory this study follows is the theory of social representation. The first sub-section 2.1 of this chapter hence explains the theory of social representation. The theory of social representation explains the need for people to identify with someone else, as a model. This chapter will highlight the work of Moscovici who explored the importance of social representation for people's personal development, and then the work of Vir, Hall and Foye (2018) who focus on the role of TV. The second sub-section 2.2 explains the main term of the research question, namely homoeroticism. Finally, in the last sub-section 2.3, the theory of social representation and homoeroticism are linked to advertising. Since advertising, as communication strategy (Belch and Belch, 2004), has an undeniable impact on people's opinions (Dyer, 2008) and can be a form of mass persuasion (Gordon, 1971). The representation of LGBTI+ individuals in advertising can play an important role, thus different studies on the topic are explored.

2.1 Theory of social representation

Moscovici (1973) defined social representation as a dual-function system of values, ideas and practices. The first function is “to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social worlds and to master it” (as cited in Moscovici, 1981, p.181). In other words, Moscovici sees social representation as social models to follow to psychologically succeed in life. When Moscovici (1973) talks about succeeding in life, this aspect is in terms of happiness. Essentially, the argument is that social representation leads to personal well-being. Secondly, for Moscovici (1981), social representation is a way to “enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history”. The second function is thus a way to feel part of a group, to feel included with people that look like you or think like you. Hence, Moscovici (1981) shows how social representations can have a positive influence on individuals' personal development.

Following the theory of social representation, the Kantar Media Research report (Vir, Hall and Foye, 2018) explains how TV can play a potent role in reflecting and shaping viewers' perceptions of the world. Advertising, which can be displayed on TV (McQuail, 1987), can act like as a mirror, reflecting audiences' lives and experiences back at them in a way they can relate to. This mirror provides validation and reassurance which is especially important for minorities (Morales, 1989). TV and advertising can also act as a window – which gives views in two directions – through which audiences can see and learn about other people, as well as providing visibility to others so that different people are seen and understood. Thus, advertising can be a mirror and a window which can provide role models.

Furthermore, role models, as aforementioned, are considered particularly important, especially for minorities. In this way, some minority groups feel that TV and advertising, which often help to address ignorance and negative perceptions through low educational TV programs and advertisements, could focus more on building strong and brilliant role models for minority groups, such as LGBTI+. LGBTI+ people strongly feel that their lives should be reflected on TV through for instance, advertising, alongside with everyone's else (Vir, Hall and Foye, 2018).

Vir, Hall and Foye (2018) also outline a comment expressed by a lesbian woman “[Social representation is] therapeutic in a way – like if you’re going through something and somebody on the picture is going through like a similar situation”. Through this statement, we understand the psychological aspect of social representation and its significant influence on LGBTI+ individuals.

Hence, this study wants to focus on social representation in advertising since, as Lindsay Pattison said: “Advertising has a moral duty to represent society at large in its output” (Pattison, 2015). Through this statement, we understand advertising must represent the diversity of society. By diversity, as explained in the introduction, minorities especially need this social representation as a model of achievement and fulfillment (Gibson and Cordova, 1999). This thesis aims to investigate the representation of lesbian, gay and bisexual minorities in advertising, however, not the portrayal of blatant homosexuality but namely, homoeroticism. According to Sender (1999), blatant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the erotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential. Moreover, homoeroticism in advertising might be a way of self-identification for LGBTI+ individuals. The following section defines the main concept of this study: homoeroticism.

2.2 Homoeroticism

The main concept of this research is homoeroticism since this thesis aims to analyse people’s perceptions of homoeroticism. The main concept is thus ‘homoeroticism’ and it has been explained and interpreted differently over the years. From homoeroticism, ‘eroticism’ can be extracted, which is defined as the ‘cultural processing’ of sex (Featherstone, 1999). In other words, it refers to the infinite different inventions, elaborations, and regulations of sexual impulses. However, eroticism can also be seen in a different manner, Giddens (2013), for example, describes it as “the cultivation of feeling, expressed through bodily sensation, in a communicative context; an art of giving and receiving pleasure”. Thus, since this thesis focus on eroticism between same-sex models, the term homoeroticism is employed. Homoeroticism induces a sexual attraction between members of the same sex, it can be male-male or female-female. It is not homosexuality since it refers to the desire itself, which might be temporary, whilst homosexuality signifies a more stable and long-lasting state of sexual orientation or relationship (Storms, 1980).

The use of homoeroticism has been employed for decades in advertising since it gives a ‘polysemic’ aspect to the image. A polysemic image has an ambiguous quality and can thus have different interpretations, which can be very interesting for brands in the case of homoeroticism. Indeed, homoerotic adverts rely upon at least two readings, one gay and one straight, in addition to the possibility of preferred readings or misreadings (Sender, 1999). Along these lines, lesbian, gay and bisexual audiences are expected to acknowledge a certain homoerotic appeal between models in advertising more often than heterosexual audiences precisely because it is relevant to them. Bronski (1984) was the first researcher to study this homoerotic appeal in advertising and people’s responses to it.

As explained in the introduction, Bronski (1984) discussed ‘gay window ads’ in his book about gay responsiveness to homoerotic adverts. He considered the rise of gay male culture across several decades following the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Bronski (1984) analysed how this increase in freedom of expression and acceptance was received by hetero- and homosexual individuals. He was also the first researcher to explain why ‘gay window advertising’ can be beneficial to brands. He provided a reason for this type of advertising; straight people are (sub)consciously attracted to the erotic appeal of the advert, and furthermore, gay people perceive gay images, and thus the advert speaks more to them. As it was made clear in the introduction, role models are important for individuals’ personal development (Moscovici, 1981) and thus, homoerotic advertisements are deeply valuable for LGBTI+ individuals, which is why they would more easily make a gay reading of the advert than straight people. In this case, brands can reach straight and gay audiences, without damaging repercussions on their brand image and reputation.

Overall, Moscovici (1981) and Bronski (1984) studied the topic of homoeroticism about 40 years ago, however, as aforementioned, in the last twenty years, three main authors have studied homoeroticism in advertising and its perception. The following part elaborates on their work.

2.3 Previous research

In her critical research about gay window advertising Sender (1999) notes, “advertisements serve a two-fold function, to provide role models with whom we can identify and through whom we can aspire to appropriate constructions of ourselves as social beings, and to guide us towards what the marketplace considers to be desirable kinds and quantities of purchasing in an increasingly commodified social environment”. Sender (1999) proceeds to explain that regarding the first function, advertising has always reflected dominant views on gender relations and ‘appropriate’ heterosexual norms. Offering more representations to LGBTI+ members is thus very important to help individuals' self-identification and self-development. Through focus groups, Sender (1999) came to the conclusion that gay people make gay readings of homoerotic adverts more frequently than straight people do. Sender (1999) also explains that heterosexual consumers do not notice the ‘gay codes’ - unspoken and unwritten signs - which allows

advertisers to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim (Clark, 1993 cited in Sender, 1999, p. 188).

However, Sender (1999) highlighted a somewhat regrettable point about homoeroticism. Indeed, homoeroticism in advertising can be seen, as she mentioned, "as the most conservative edge of the progress towards gay advertising", since homoeroticism is not openly displaying homosexuality. Gay window advertising can, therefore, be considered, as Sender (1999) indicated: "a kind of double-edged sword". Feigning to offer LGBTI+ images to LGBTI+ individuals without actually taking the risk to display it clearly. In this way, Sender (1999) suggested that homoerotic images in advertising might only be "a limited victory" (1993, p. 17). Homoerotic adverts show a restrained success for two reasons. First, homoeroticism does not display homosexuality or bisexuality openly, it still "hides" or cover it. Second, increasing LGBTI+ visibility might falsely increase the image of wealth and power LGBTI+ individuals have in society, which can easily be appropriated by political right wings parties as an argument that homosexuals are not disadvantaged in society. The latter is, however, a much complex topic.

Nevertheless, Sender (1999) concluded that lesbian, gay and bisexual audiences did, indeed, identify subtextual references and made gay readings of the adverts shown more often than heterosexual audiences. According to Sender (1999), if homosexual and bisexual made gay readings more easily it is specifically and precisely because they were more relevant to them, they felt related.

Homoerotic allure in adverts has been studied by Sender (1999) and recently Oakenfull (2007) considered the topic specifically from a business position. Oakenfull (2007) tried to understand how gays and lesbians react to homoerotic appeal in adverts and the positive impact that targeting homosexual individuals can have for companies. As aforementioned, the gay market has been considered to be a dream market for brands (Roth, n.d), since awareness and cultural acceptance largely prevents a potential backlash that companies supporting LGBTI+ rights may have faced before. Advertising to LGBTI+ individuals is thus more feasible than ten years ago. Oakenfull (2007) demonstrates that individuals' level of gay identity plays a decisive role in determining his or her response to diverse types of gay-oriented advertising messages. These findings are similar to the ones of Sender (1999).

Oakenfull (2007) also raised an important point, which is one of the motives explaining why LGBTI+ individuals would make gay readings of the adverts more often than straight individuals would. As with many subcultures, the gay and lesbian subculture has developed "markers of gay identity" (Tharp 2001, cited in Oakenfull 2007, P.58) such as clothes, symbols, language and appearances which hold specific meanings to members of the subculture. This reason hence explains why some details and subtexts in homoerotic adverts would be read as 'gay' by gay people and why straight people would not even notice them. In that case, once again brands can display homoerotic adverts in their communication campaign targeting both straight and gay people without risking their brand image from more conservative individuals.

Furthermore, Oakenfull (2007) also found out in his research that ‘low gay identity’ males and females, i.e. LGTI+ people who do not express strong subcultural homosexual clichés such as a feminine man or a masculine woman will prefer the implicit gay imagery to explicit gay imagery of the opposite sex. In other words, Oakenfull (2007) explains a gay male might prefer to exclusively see an advert with a homoerotic appeal of two gay males rather than an over-sexualised advert of two gay women. In this case, brands might find interesting to make use of homoeroticism in advertising rather than blatant homosexuality to ensure to target all LGBTI+ individuals. Besides, in the best case scenario, as aforementioned, heterosexual people do not notice the homoerotic appeal of the advert and the brand target them as well which would thus definitely benefit to the brand in term of profit. However, this theory is based on a western culture point of view. The same analysis would certainly give different results if conducted with another culture. Added to the fact that it is very difficult to define what people can or cannot perceive and since people’s culture, origins and beliefs also influence their perception, the same study in Asia or Latin America, in cities or ethnicities, might turn up with completely different results.

However, Oakenfull (2007) found that individuals' level of gay identity played an important role in determining his or her response to various types of homoerotic advertising. Hence, this study intends to analyse if LGBTI+ people in 2019 are more sensitive to homoerotic appeal in adverts than straight people are, based on people living in Rotterdam. It is important to mention that Rotterdam is a large city in a developed country with western culture. This study, unlike the one of Herdt (2018) has been made in one unique city with individuals who, although from different countries, has now been living for years in Europe, and share relatively the same education and lifestyle.

This part elaborates on the research of Reichert (2001) who, such as Oakenfull (2007), studied homoeroticism in advertising, however focusing on displayed homoeroticism between women. Reichert (2001) studied female same-sex eroticism in his Ph.D. and analysed how women and men perceive homoerotic images of two women in adverts. Most previous studies focused on homoerotic allure in general in advertising until Reichert (2001) decided to concentrate on female homoeroticism. In other words, other studies were paying attention to men-men and women-women homoeroticism but Reichert (2001) aimed attention at women-women only, and how men and women perceive the homoerotic appeal. It is interesting to consider the differences between the two types of same-sex eroticism. Male same-sex eroticism certainly targets gay men, while female same-sex is meant to target straight men (Gimenez, 2011). Thus, women never seem to be targeted. However, it is important to mention that, according to Gimenez (2011), men and women react differently to sexualised messages in the media (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002, Liu, Cheng & Li, 2009). While men tend to be attracted, women are more likely to be offended. Thus, this could explain why women are not targeted and in this way, as Reichert (2001) criticises, these female same-sex images have not much to do with lesbian identification but more do to with male fantasy looking at two women for pleasure. In this analyse Reichert (2001) has a progressive

mindset, however, the researcher also expressed discriminatory comments which, to a certain extent, might discredit his study.

Reichert (2001) mentioned, about his sample of homoerotic adverts, "the women are beautiful and feminine, wear silken lingerie, and fail to look like any lesbians I have ever encountered, although I recognise that some exist". It is certainly true the women displayed in the sample of adverts Reichert used are extremely feminine and do not spread any subcultural homosexual cliché such as the ones Oakenfull (2007) mentioned. In this way, the advert can look sarcastic and fake, only done as a marketing purpose, to tick boxes (Singh, 2017). However, Reichert (2001) says 'the women are feminine and beautiful', assuming lesbians cannot be feminine and beautiful. This comment communicates a stereotypical outdated view of lesbians and women in general which might be offending for women; lesbians or straight. This discriminatory judgment cannot be accepted in 2019. Furthermore, in western societies, it does not apply much anymore since subcultural homosexual cliché tend to be erased, and femininities and masculinities tend to be unisex (Paoletti, 2015).

Overall, Reichert (2001) understood that representations of homosexuality were entering mainstream consumer culture. It was hence important to understand how these adverts containing homoerotic imagery were interpreted by the public. He thus conducted three focus groups organised depending on people's gender and showed them three homoerotic adverts representing two women. The results showed that straight men were more likely to see those images as sexual while women had different opinions. Women often perceived the relationship between models as a power relation or altercation. However, the point that seems to be the most relevant is that, when images were seen as homoerotic, they were seen as accidental, as a sexual adventure, or the result of simple horniness. Participants were not imagining this homoeroticism as a possible realistic attraction between the models. This finding shows how homoerotic appeal and to some extent homosexuality is not been taken seriously by consumers. The purpose of this thesis is to analyse either if, in 2019, people's view has changed or not, on this topic. Furthermore, if homoeroticism can be seen as the beginning of a relationship between two people rather than just a sexual adventure as Reichert (2001) found out.

Following the theory of social representation and its importance for individual self-development, and based on the work of, notably, Sender (1999), Reichert (2001) and Oakenfull (2007), this project considers the various perceptions of homoeroticism in advertising. Does sexual orientation influence people's perception of homoerotic adverts such as in Oakenfull's (2007) research? Are homosexual and bisexual people more likely to conclude gay readings of homoerotic adverts as in the work of Sender (1999)? Moreover, as Oakenfull (2007) explained, it is imperative to know how heterosexual individuals would react to homoerotic adverts to inform future advertising campaigns. Being able to reach LGBTI+ and straight people in one advert can be truly beneficial for companies. This study has thus gathered 25 individuals with different gender and sexual orientations to analyse their perceptions of homoeroticism in 11 advertisements. The following part elaborates on the method followed to conduct it.

3. Method

In this chapter, the research design and procedure adopted for this thesis will be explained. To answer the research question this study must analyse people's perception of homoeroticism and to do so, a stimulus material of about ten adverts was presented in four focus groups. This chapter explains every step of this qualitative method of analysis.

To answer the research question of the master thesis, a qualitative method has been used.

Qualitative methods have been chosen over quantitative methods regarding the purpose of the project. We must look at the research question to understand. One of the main terms is 'perception' and, as Patton (2005) said, if the researcher talks with people about their experiences and perceptions around focus groups, for instance, qualitative method is the right method to choose. That is why a qualitative analysis was preferred to answer the research question of this master thesis.

Qualitative research is used when analysing the experience of individuals or groups (Patton, 2005) which is exactly what this thesis tends to analyse. The researcher has an important part in the research process and analysis of a qualitative method, in term of his own personal presence as a researcher and, especially, in the reflexivity he brings to the role (Barbour, 2008). Despite, this study has been processed and analysed in the most impartial and neutral way as possible.

The analysis of this project consisted of gathering about ten adverts to be presented in various focus groups. This sample of ten adverts pictures homoeroticism or in other words, a homoerotic appeal or homoerotic allure. The term homoeroticism is generally used in this thesis, thus homoeroticism in the ten adverts has been assessed by the researcher herself.

The stimulus materials were shown in four different focus groups with heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual participants. The focus groups provided the opportunity to understand people's different interpretations of homoeroticism in advertising depending on their sexual orientation and thus answer the research question of this project. Moreover, the focus group methodology allowed a number of interests for the analysis, as Lunt and Livingstone (1996) explained "it offers qualitative data as an alternative to quantitative findings" such as Oakenfull (2007) did, in his quantitative study "Effects of Gay Identity, Gender and Explicitness of Advertising Imagery on Gay Responses to Advertising".

Lunt and Livingstone (1996) added that the focus group methodology "facilitates efficient data collection since more than one participant may be interviewed at one time; researchers can control the constitution of groups to compare how different social positions influence meaning-making; and, most importantly, in focus groups, researchers gain access to people's "everyday talk" about media" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 85). The researchers also mentioned focus groups are significant to the theoretical framework of the research, inducing that focus groups foster inductive methods of analysis. The analysis methodology will be explained in part 3.3.

This project consisted of three main phases. First, gathering adverts and organising the focus groups, second, the process of the focus groups and last, their analysis. The following parts elaborate on them.

3.1 Preparation

The first phase consisted of finding ten advertising in the media and simultaneously contacting gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, intersex or straight people to bring together for the various focus groups. First, an explanation of the advertisements, second, the participants.



Figure 1. Presentation of all adverts numerated.

3.1.1 The advertisements

Ten adverts displaying a homoerotic appeal were selected. Those adverts are part of contemporary campaigns for fashion brands and have been recently publicised which is therefore more pertinent.

However, some adverts are older, since it is interesting to compare what advertising was displaying a couple of years - or decades ago. Advertisements from the 1960s to 2019 were selected.

The sample above shows brands such as Suit Supply, Calvin Klein, Issey Miyaki, Dolce & Gabbana, Chloé, Ron Dorff, The Men's Store, Abercrombie & Fitch. Most of these adverts were published in the last three years. Only advert #9 from the Men's Store was published in the 1960s. This advert is very interesting since, added to the homoerotic tension between the two guys, if you look at it closer there is also a woman dressed up as a bunny in the background, what aroused some intrigue from the participants that noticed it. This advert is from a brand called The Men's Store, nowadays quite unknown from general public, however, the rest of the adverts are from significantly more prominent brands in advertising in the 2010s. Respectively, Tom Ford, Calvin Klein, Chloé, Abercrombie & Fitch, Suit Supply, represent famous and influential brands of the 2010s, and especially, as explained further on, famous and influential brands for the sample of participants chosen.

As can be seen on Figure 1, there are in fact 11 adverts, the Tom Ford #6B has only been shown in one focus group. This advert was found later on during the preparation of the project and the researcher could present it to focus group 4 only. This group was composed of straight women only, this point will be explained further when describing participants' criterion. Displaying advert Tom Ford #6B was indeed very interesting. The researcher wanted to analyse if participants would find the advert more homoerotic since the two girls are literally kissing. The results will show that it was the opposite.

This following table resumes all adverts per brand and year of release.

Advert	Brand	Year
1	Issey Miyaki	2019
2	Chloé	2019
3	Abercrombie & Fitch	2012
4	Calvin Klein	2019
5	Ron Dorff	2018
6a	Tom Ford	2016
6b	Tom Ford	2016
7	Chloé	2017
8	Suit Supply	2018
9	The Men's Store	1960
10	Abercrombie & Fitch	2014

Figure 2. Table classifying adverts according to their number on figure 1.

As it can be noticed, most of those brands are luxury brands which sell expensive products and serve a limited clientele. Luxurious brands are generally provocative and disruptive in order to get more intention and to attract potential buyers (Bastien and Kapferer, 2012, p.155). Since provocation sells in advertising (Vézina and Paul, 1997) and that homoeroticism is, to some extent, seen as a form of provocation, luxury brands are more likely to depict homoeroticism in their advertising. Indeed, the sample selected is constituted of many luxury brands which demonstrate this argument.

In the mean time this convenient sample of ten adverts was gathered, to ensure a purposive sample, twenty participants had to be found - straights, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex - to participate in four different focus groups, the next part explains the process.

3.1.2 The participants

Participants must fit only four criteria in order to participate in this study. First, being aged between 18 and 25. The age range is such because it represents the youngest part of the millennials, a generation that was raised at the beginning of the 21st century. This collaborative and optimistic generation (Raines, 2002), supposing to be more aware of LGBTI+ and more open-minded about the topic, would be thus more able to give a constructive opinion. Second criteria, being able to express their sexual orientation in order to form the focus groups - heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual or any other sexual orientation. Third, have no previous education in advertising and fourth, not knowing the researcher personally. In fact, to obtain an impartial and fair perception of the adverts, participants must be distant from the researcher or the topic studied. Choosing participants close to the researcher would distort the results as much as choosing participant specialised in advertising (Morgan, 1997). No particular ethnicity was however requested.

Individuals were contacted through the researcher's personal network and the association Erasmus Pride. The latter unites LGBTI+ people. Many individual messages were sent on Facebook Messenger via the researcher's personal Facebook and the Erasmus Pride Facebook. Finding heterosexual people were predicted to be the easiest but the process showed LGBTI+ people were gathered more quickly. In fact, LGBTI+ individuals often have a developed activist angle and wish to be heard (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014). The most difficult was, however, to gather participants at the same time, the same day and at the same place but this step was eventually made and four focus groups were planned. The following table sums up participants characteristics in the four different groups.

	Participants				
Focus group	Name (have been changed)	Age	Nationality	Gender	Sexual Orientation
1	- Timel - Ady - Irene - Noel - Roxane	21 18 21 19 25	Dutch French/American Dutch Dutch Dutch	Male Female Trans-Female Trans-Male Female	Gay Bisexual Heterosexual Pansexual Bisexual
2	- Ingel - Halie - Olaf - Regala - Dan - Maria	20 19 24 22 21 19	Dutch Dutch Danish English Dutch Salvadorean	Female Female Male Female Male Female	Bisexual Bisexual Heterosexual Bisexual Gay Bisexual
3	- Danny - Sunje - Alene - Charlene	22 19 20 19	Dutch/American Norwegian American French	Female Female Female Female	Heterosexual Heterosexual Heterosexual Heterosexual
4	- Nick - Hawai - Timel - Ary	23 19 20 21	German Dutch Dutch Indian	Male Male Male Male	Heterosexual Heterosexual Heterosexual Heterosexual

Figure 3. Table displaying the organisation of the participants among the focus groups.

The first focus group was composed of LGBTI+ participants only, with various gender and sexual orientations. One participant identified as gay, two as bisexuals and two were transgender yet identified heterosexuals as a sexual orientation. The focus group took place at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

One limit appeared in the selection of participants' sexual orientation. Although this research wants to represent everyone and open the limits of sexual orientation, it was quite complicated to discern and include every participant's gender and sexual orientation in this research. For instance, if a participant is transgender, yet he/she is an LGBTI+ individual but his/her sexual orientation might be, such as the example aforementioned: heterosexual. This research aimed at the analysis of people's perception of homoeroticism depending on their sexual orientation and in the first group, sexual orientations and genders were mixed. Research has proven heterosexual transgender individuals have a different personality and mindset than cisgender¹ straight participants (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014), for that reason they were in the LGBTI+ group - the T stands for Transgender hence some rules had to be followed. However, the researcher admits that maybe only lesbians, gays and bisexuals participants - transgender or not - should have been included in the same focus group. In that case, transgender yet

¹ Cisgender: people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth, the opposite is transgender.

heterosexual participants would have been with the heterosexual groups. This line remains very complicated to settle.

The second group was composed of LGBTI+ and heterosexual people: one lesbian, one gay, three bisexuals and one straight guy. The mix of sexual orientation and gender in this group had the purpose to analyse if heterosexual participants would be influenced by LGBTI+ participants in their acknowledgment of homoeroticism - or vice versa. The results will show that relatively not.

The third group had only straight girls, four of them, and the extra advert Tom Ford #6B was shown to them. Those two groups also took place at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, in Polak.

The last group had five straight men and took place in their house since the guys were living together among other people, the researcher did not know any of them but obtained their contact via a friend that also lives in the guys' house. The last groups were constituted of straight participants only to analyse if their acknowledgment would be different without LGBTI+ participants on the table.

3.2 Process of focus groups

As the research question focuses on 'perception', the main focus of this research is people's perceptions of the stimulus material during these focus groups. Do individuals perceive homoeroticism differently depending on their sexual orientation?

Four focus group with four to six people in each giving a total of twenty people were conducted. The choice of focus groups rather than interviews was made according to Morgan (1988) who advocated using focus group alternatively to one-to-one interviews in a situation where respondents could find face-to-face interaction intimidating. He asserted focus groups encourage the participation of participants that could otherwise be more shy and hesitant.

The participants were divided and organised into four groups regarding their sexual orientation, such as Sender (1999) did. Sender (1999) organised participants according to their sexual orientation. In case she knew their sexual orientation beforehand, in exclusively straight or exclusively LGBTI+ groups, whenever she was not certain of their sexual orientation, she assigned participants to mixed groups. This method proved to be efficient, this study hence followed the same line.

Focus group 3 and 4 were respectively composed of straight women and straight men. The reason was to avoid heterosexual men to take the lead over heterosexual women, a situation that has been proven in business management (Powell, 2018). This research does not assume necessarily that Powell's (2018) findings are comparable and applicable but this study wished to considerate them. Thus, straight women and straight men were separated. Focus group 1, was the LGBTI+ group with men and women mixed. LGBTI+ individuals, regarding the fact of their sexual orientation, must overcome challenges of integration and well-being (OECD Indicators, 2019). They represent individuals with more progressive ideas and personalities, hence, men and women were mixed. Moreover, since a smaller part of the

population is homosexual, bisexual or transgender, it was presumed to be harder to reach them so a mix focus group was a more realistic approach. In the end, as aforementioned, finding LGBTI+ participants turned out to be easier than planned. Lastly, focus group 2 was a mix of women and men with a mix of sexualities to notice - or not - a difference of interpretations in comparison with other focus groups.

Before to display adverts to participants, an ice breaker exercise was realised. This exercise represents a small game of a few minutes allowing participants who do not know each other to break the ice between them. This method provides valuable outcomes: successful data collection and overall positive experience according to participants (Gibson, 2007). The ice breaker consisted of writing down a 'fun fact' on a paper. Participants had been informed to think about a fun fact prior to the focus groups. Once the fun fact was written participants had to fold the paper to a paper plane shape, what was already entertaining. Then the paper planes were thrown in the room and each participant had to pick one up. Finally, one at a time, participants had to read the fun fact out loud and everyone had to guess to whom it belongs. It is important to mention participants did not know each other, except Dan and Hallie in group 2 that have one course in common at university, Sunje and Charlotte in group 3 that had friends in common and the group 4 indeed, since the participants were roommates. Participants did not know each other - or barely - yet, thanks to the ice breaker and for most of them, their interest in the topic, debates were stimulated and opinions well thought-out and articulated.

After this ice breaker, the definitive sample composed of the ten - or eleven - adverts illustrating homoeroticism was presented. It was thus possible to get live reactions of the participants facing these adverts. Those reactions will be presented in the results in Chapter 4.

These results have been obtained through the most common methods such as, according to Kidd and Marshall (2000): recording, note taking and memory-based analysis. Barbour (2008) advised to carefully and repeatedly consider what you are willing to achieve through the focus group, in this case, people's interpretations of homoeroticism depending on their sexuality and thus, the importance - or not - of social representation. The whole process was recorded and the audio file transcribed 'verbatim'.

3.3 Analysis

The 'verbatim' transcript was analysed by means of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is among the most used methods of qualitative analysis (Aronson, 1995). It is a methodical approach to characterise the meaning of qualitative data (Joffe and Yardley, 2004) and help the analysis and thematisation of the focus groups' transcripts. Thematic analysis is an accessible and flexible method that permits looking at the data in multiple different ways (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Not necessarily theoretical flexibility, but in terms of research question, constitution, sample size data collection method, and approaches to codes and themes generation.

The analysis was composed of two main steps. First, generating codes, second, creating themes. Every unit of the text potentially relevant to the research question was selected. Those units are codes which form the foundations to organise ideas and create themes. Themes were created regarding the recurrence and relevance of words and topics expressed and, two charts were drawn to facilitate understanding of the analysis Appendix 2.

Deductive and inductive analysis were conducted, although mostly inductive analysis proved to be effective. An inductive analysis allows searching for general laws based on the observation of specific facts. Those specific facts were the results of the focus groups. In that sense, there was no hypothesis engaged or theory certainly expected prior to the focus groups.

However, the work of Sender (1999) and the theory built that homosexuals and bisexuals more often make gay readings of homoeroticism than heterosexuals were considered. In that case, a deductive method was used to inform the analysis of the data. This theory, however, proved to be quite inaccurate in this study, this part is elaborated in the results in chapter 4.

Overall, this research method and rationale were significantly efficient for this research. The transcription ‘verbatim’ allowed a prime analysis through themes and codes. This analysis elaborated in the results section in chapter 4.

3.4 Ethics

Regarding ethics, participants were told that the nature of the study is ‘gender representation in advertising’. They neither knew the real focus of the session nor the importance of their sexual orientation. It was made clear to them that the researcher is a student from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the process of preparing a Master thesis. However, to ensure an honest answer, they were unaware of the goal of the study. As soon as the data was collected and the focus group was over, a debrief was held. It was important to take time with the participants to let them raise any concerns and ensure to tell them they could contact the researcher if they wished to query anything (Barbour, 2008). They were informed that, at this time, they could ask for any comment to be erased of the transcript. Moreover, participants were fully apprised that their participation was voluntary and withdrawing from the research was possible at any time. Lastly, participants’ identities were and still remain confidential to this research. Therefore, fictitious names have been used in order to protect the privacy of the people interviewed. Additionally, none of the participants were paid for her or his time.

4. Results

This chapter elaborates on the results of this study. The codes and themes are organised in two charts which can be found in Appendix 2. The results overall showed that sexual orientation did not influence the acknowledgment of homoeroticism since 24 participants - out of 25 - to some extent acknowledged homoeroticism, this main finding is at the antipodes of what Sender (1999) found. However, LGBTI+ and heterosexual participants sometimes perceived it differently. As explained in the previous section, four focus groups were conducted and five main observations were recognised, they are further explained in five different sub-sections. The first sub-section 4.1 shows that participants globally acknowledged homoeroticism through the ambiguity of the adverts shown. Sub-section 4.2 elaborates on LGBTI+ participants asking for more LGBTI+ representation. Sub-section 4.3 emphasises on the fake aspect of the adverts when homoeroticism seemed to be forced. Sub-section 4.4 reveals cases when homoeroticism was less - or not - acknowledged. The last sub-section 4.5 points out how brands can benefit from homoeroticism.

Among participants who acknowledged homoeroticism, some acknowledged it immediately and for some, it took a bit more time. 90% of LGBTI+ participants acknowledged homoeroticism immediately and 80% of heterosexual participants, so the time needed to acknowledge homoeroticism did not depend on the participants' sexual orientation. However, LGBTI+ were more engaged exclusively on the homoeroticism feeling, demanding more social representation for example, this point will be elaborated in section 4.2. On the other hand, heterosexuals showed interest in the gayness of the adverts but also discussed other points such as the ethnicity of the models - or paid attention to different details which will be explained in section 4.4.

First, and most importantly, the ambiguous intimacy between the models on the adverts helped participants to acknowledge homoeroticism. The next part elaborates on it.

4.1 Ambiguity

One of the way participants discussed homoeroticism is through the ambiguity of the adverts. This sub-section 4.1 shows that participants detected homoeroticism through the perception of an ambiguous intimate relationship between the models. However, participants acknowledged homoeroticism without necessarily employing the word itself, engaging different ways of discussing the homoerotic appeal acknowledged in the adverts, such as 'intimacy', 'connection', 'kinda gay'.

Participants acknowledged homoeroticism through the underlying notion of ambiguity. The notion of ambiguity is constant, participants found ambiguous a certain intimate appeal between the models. This intimacy depicts the homoerotic feeling, as Feathersone (1999) stated, eroticism is "the cultural processing of sex", from friends to lovers referring to any sexual feelings, this 'ambiguity' in the

middle. This ambiguity in between same-sex people - instead of opposite-sex people - gives a gay appeal to the advert. In focus group 1, composed exclusively of LGBTI+ participants, Roxane said: "you think, maybe they're kinda gay", here using the words 'maybe' and 'kinda' indicates the ambiguity of the relationship depicted in the advert. Irene also perceived this ambiguity "it's ambiguous it doesn't scream heterosexual it doesn't scream homosexual, it's somewhere in the middle". Timel also observed this ambiguity noticing the models do not seem to be friends "they just really don't feel like... friends". Through this comment Timel shows his doubts, if the models are not friends, are they lovers? Roxane expressed her doubts as well stating that "whatever you're interpreting it, it could be gay for you or it could be something else" and Sunje, a straight participant from focus group 3 said: "I feel like it's implying something homosexual in a sense... you could interpret it as gay you could interpret it as straight whatever, you know, it seems to tick all the politically correct boxes". Sunje pinpoints the fact that it has become - fortunately - trendy to represent all individuals in advertising. Those statements overall show that, from all groups, participants raise doubts regarding the nature of the relationship between the models. This ambiguity is erotic which thus means homoerotic, since depicting same-sex models.



Figure 1. Presentation of all adverts numerated.

The nature of the relationship is ambiguous for participants, it is mysterious. Roxane says the adverts display “slightly homoerotic or besties” relationships, “it’s a mystery it can be both ways it speaks to everyone”. By ‘everyone’, Roxane means heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals or people with other sexual orientation people can claim. Thus, she understands the mystery of the relationship is a way to target heterosexuals and LGBTI+ individuals since everyone can interpret it as they want. Sunje, a heterosexual participant from focus group 3 finds the way the Ron Dorff advert #5 and The Men’s Store #9 are displayed interesting, saying: “#5 and #9 you can see that the men are kind of in unity and then the woman is alone and background. I think that is also implying that they kind of work together in something”. Alene depicted the mystery in the advert Abercrombie & Fitch #3, imagining they are just “getting off a cuddle”. Through these comments, participants picture the models in intimacy.

In fact, the vast majority of the participants saw intimacy in the adverts, using repeatedly the lexical field related to intimacy. From focus group 2, the mixed group, Hallie, a bisexual participant perceived advert #8 from Suit Supply as intimate saying “the guys are a bit more intimate, how they pose and stuff and their faces are close together”. Regala, a bisexual participant from the same group as well said: “the two that look more of an intimate romantic picture would be the Suit Supply #8 and Abercrombie & Fitch #10”. Timel from focus group 1 talked about the Calvin Klein advert #4 saying, “they look like one body [...], trying to show the theme of closeness and stuff [...], they are really close to each other”. The girls from focus group 3 all agreed on the intimate feeling depicted. Charlene said: “most of them look...”, Sunje cut her off saying “intimate” and Danny approved “yeah intimate”. Through those comments, we understand most participants acknowledged intimacy through the closeness and intimacy between participants. ‘Closeness’ might not necessarily - and generally - mean ‘intimacy’ but in this situation, participants depicted homoeroticism from the closeness they found intimate.

Intimacy is associated with eroticism (Weeks, 2007), since as aforementioned, eroticism expressed the bodily sensation expressed from feelings and mental perception (Giddens, 2013). In this case, since the adverts pictured same-sex relationships, it is ‘homoeroticism’. An interesting point deserves to be mentioned. Since nudity is often perceived as sexual (Cover, 2003), the fact that some models appear relatively naked could have enhanced the acknowledgment of eroticism in those adverts. However, most of the participants were conscious that a difference must be made between the different types of clothing brands. As Oliveira and Scopinho (2012) said, nudity is essential to sell swimmers but not to sell t-shirts. Timel, from focus group 1 summarised the situation saying: “the Abercrombie & Fitch advert #3 is a little more sexual but also it’s because they’re selling swimwear”. This understanding of nudity and sexuality had no correlation with participants’ sexual orientation. The next paragraph shows that participants’ sexual orientation did not influence their perception of intimacy, sexuality or homoeroticism in the overall study.

Perceptions of intimacy were not influenced by the sexual orientation of the participants.

Heterosexuals and LGBTI+ participants, from all groups, acknowledged it the same. The next paragraph pinpoints statements made by heterosexual participants expressing the intimate ambiguity of the adverts and to some extent, homoeroticism.

This paragraph shows that, in this study, individuals' sexual orientation did not influence when it came to the acknowledgment of homoeroticism. Thus, the following findings follow the deducted assumption deducted of this study, that heterosexual individuals perceived homoeroticism as fast and as much as LGBTI+ participants. These findings are demonstrating the opposite of what Sender (1999) found. In the two focus groups formed exclusively with heterosexual women and heterosexual men, respectively focus group 3 and 4, participants acknowledged the homoerotic aspects of the adverts within the first minutes, even seconds of the focus group. For instance, in focus group 3, Danny is the first person to express herself and comments notice that all adverts show "same-sex duos or trios", she mentioned that the advert #3 from Abercrombie & Fitch is constituted of two men and one woman but she pinpoints "it does look like the man is admiring the other man or something, so like [the woman] is not in the spotlight in the ad but the other man is". Danny talks about admiring in a sensual way, such as Sunje, from the same group, also said in the first minutes "advert #3 looks like they're having a fun time in front of the camera, the camera is here and they're being watched and they're still over each other". Through these statements, one would understand these heterosexual participants perceived eroticism between the models and thus, acknowledged homoeroticism.

This acknowledgment was also made in the focus group 4 with Ary who indicated that "they're all of the same genders and I think usually advertisements promote heteronormativity, but I think this is doing the opposite". It is important to mention that Ary has had an advertising course during his Economics Bachelor. However, in the first seconds of the focus group, he said this coherent comment which completely aligns in the assumption that this study deducted. This assumption believes that heterosexual participants acknowledged the homoeroticism displayed in those adverts as fast and as much as LGBTI+ participants. Ary also said "I'm sorry I might be completely wrong. This might be really dumb but in some ads, it feels like they're promoting homosexuality as well...and you know? [...], people of the same gender hugging each other, I don't know it's just a feeling". In this statement, Ary is including the word "promotion" which includes a business aspect already, the latter will be discussed in part 4.3. From the same group, focus group 4, Hawai mentioned "there's a sexual appeal over here, picture #5 from Ron Dorff and picture #3 from Abercrombie & Fitch, usually in such advertisements they are people of the opposite sex, but nowadays you can see that there's a change that there are also introducing homosexuals and that's the trend". Hawai's spontaneous statement also correlates with the assumption deducted in this study that heterosexuals participants acknowledged quite clearly the homoeroticism in those adverts. Hawai goes even further, understanding this representation of LGBTI+ can be a business point and perceived as a trend. If the participant believes this representation of same-sex relationship is a

marketing trend, hence, the question arises whether the social representation is effective or bias? This particular aspect will be discussed in section 4.3.

In certain cases, LGBTI+ participants were the ones being more skeptical regarding the displayed homoeroticism. For instance, Ingel from the focus group 2 said: “you kinda see there is kinda like a connection between two people but it’s still very like high fashion, very much like detached connection”. In this case, Ingel was actually more skeptical of the homoeroticism while she considered herself as bisexual. Per contra, in some other cases, LGBTI participants were convinced by the homoerotic appeal of the adverts, depicting love between the models. For example, Irene, from the focus group 1 believes brands, through those adverts, want to spread a feeling of love between the models “we [as a brand] wanna make you feel that these two women or two men are in love”. This quote illustrates that Irene perceives some love and she believes that sharing a love feeling was the brands’ selling point.

Homoeroticism is more than just a connection if it expressed love, it is seen as homosexuality in that case.

This study understands the acknowledgment of homoeroticism depends considerably on the adverts and on every individual. LGBTI+ and heterosexual participants often had a different perception of it. Ary, a heterosexual participant from focus group 4 mentioned: “Yeah, it's like I think it depends from person to person like different people interpret the advertisements differently”. This comment introduces the next paragraph, showing participants perceptions of homoeroticism can differ. Some aspects were exclusively observed by heterosexual participants, some exclusively by LGBTI+, some by both. The next paragraph displays whichever aspects were noticed by heterosexuals. Further on, in the sub-section 4.2, aspects observed by LGBTI+ will also be revealed.

Heterosexual participants from focus group 3 pinpointed something in the adverts that LGBTI+ participants did not discuss. They perceived clearer homoeroticism when two men were depicted rather than when two women were. In other words, the closeness between two men was inducing more intimacy or sexuality than the closeness between two women. Alene, a heterosexual participant from focus group 3 found less homoerotic appeal in the adverts with two female models, expressing “#9 looks more like a ‘girl night out’!”. Through this statement, Alene explained that two girls being touchy appears less “gay” than two men doing the same “because girls are more touchy by nature”. She thus sees more eroticism in the advert #3 representing two men being physically close, “about advert #3, I feel like it's just my instinct to be like... ‘oh, they might be gay’” because she is less used to seeing men being touchy. This according to Alene, gives an intimate appeal to the advert. Her neighbour Sunje shared the same opinion believing that it is more shocking to have two men kissing in an advert than two women, at least not for her, but for society. She distanced herself, specifying she does not share this vision. She says, “when you look at #6B you think that’s just an ad, a pretty picture kind of... but if it was a man that was kissing for the picture that would be kind of seen as radical”. Alene approved and expanded the argument “Like when two women kiss it's like not seen as homosexual, at first, sometimes! But like with men it's automatically a different thought process for most people”. The two heterosexual participants raised a

point that was not mentioned by the LGBTI+ participants. We can hence conclude that the perception of homoeroticism, in those adverts specifically, differed depending on participants' sexual orientation. It can be taken into account that LGBTI+ individuals, supposedly encountering more diversity daily (Herdt, 2018), would consider two men being closed as natural as two women being closed, and the homoerotic appeal would not seem stronger when two men are displayed.

A different aspect that was also exclusively perceived by heterosexual participants is the inversion of masculine and feminine stereotypes, which according to them, gives an erotic sentiment. In fact, masculinities and femininities in some adverts are depicted in an unconventional manner. Some women are portrayed as more 'masculine' and some men as more 'feminine'. This inversion of usual stereotypes gives a homoerotic appeal to the adverts. As Shilling and Mellor (1996) explained, the homoerotic appeal comes from the perception of sensuality. Sensuality is often unconsciously perceived as a weakness and because men have to be strong and dominating, depicting them as sensual can give a gay appeal to the advert. Danny, a straight participant, expressed "I think it's also like, reverse... sexism but like... how women are like sometimes too manly when they're acting aggressively and like men are too feminine when they're acting like... here you see that the men are like cuddling like it's like he's not standing there like with his hands on his hips like showing off his muscles like...". What Danny tries to explain here is that the men are represented quite sensually in the adverts, which gives a feminine impression and thus since he sees a feminine man, he perceives a gay appeal. The assumption of Schilling and Mellor (1996) is thus confirmed with Danny statement. The above statements demonstrate although heterosexual and LGBTI+ participants both acknowledged homoeroticism, some details were exclusively pinpointed by heterosexuals and some exclusively by LGBTI+.

Besides, this paragraph demonstrates a point that both heterosexual and LGBTI+ participants noticed, they all acknowledged homoeroticism by depicting stereotypes of heterosexual relationship through the adverts. Some adverts depict two women but one woman is more 'masculine', supposing to represent the male, and one is more 'feminine', supposing to represent the female. Alene, from focus group 3 mentioned "I saw that as like your stereotypical heterosexual relationship, but like portrayed with two women like there's like the guy and the girl" and Danny, from the same group, replied "advert #4 from Calvin Klein, one has masculine clothing and the one behind her she's like fragile like kinda holding into her, and number #2 from Chloé as well. Like she's wearing like a baggy t-shirt and the other one is wearing like a feminine dress" and "#6A from Tom Ford shows, I don't know strong women clothes maybe (laugh)". Danny refers to the fact the model is wearing a dress with a massive chain on her back, what would give a strong feeling and thus, more 'masculine' perception of the woman. These statements show that participants perceived a type of hierarchy between the models, which gives a homoerotic sentiment to the advert. Alene said "#5 from Ron Dorff, I see kinda like a hierarchy" and Danny added, "there's always like a dominant person in the relationship with more masculinities like everything here is based on hierarchy". Ingel, from focus group 2, a bisexual participant, also noticed this hierarchy "it's

always a woman below and one behind, it's kind of like interesting, like powered...”. Hence, both heterosexual and LGBTI+ participants perceived a masculine/feminine hierarchy that is usually displayed in heterosexual relationships in advertising (Goffman, 1979). In fact, Goffman (1979) demonstrated how women were often displayed behind or under the man in advertising, to convey a sense of strength and power. As aforementioned the advert #4 from Calvin Klein, #5 from Ron Dorff and #6A from Tom Ford can communicate this sense as well. According to the participants, this hierarchy thus gives a homoerotic feeling to the adverts. However, the following paragraph shows that LGBTI+ participants have divided opinions regarding such a representation of same-sex relationships.

Some LGBTI+ participants find the adverts shown positive in terms of social representation while some did not. Hallie, a bisexual participant from focus group 2 found that most of the adverts displaying homoeroticism can “empower people”. Hallie has a positive reaction to these adverts. Irene, from the same group, felt more conflicted as she believes the representation has been improved although there is a long journey ahead before to reach equal representation of same-sex relations “I think it'd be better, it's started now but... it's gonna be better cause advertisers have started to look out of their office window more than... to what they've done before”, she is positive about the possible evolution “I think it gives a better social representation and can help some people”. In contrast to the positive evaluations of the advertising by Hallie and Irene, Ingel, from focus group 2, expressed her disappointment with “I totally understand (what Hallie and Irene are saying) but hence you can't call it diversity, you can't call it a representation of different sexualities if it's not explicitly ‘representation’ [...]”. According to Ingel, more representation is needed. Ingel was not the only one among LGBTI+ to ask for more LGBTI+ representation, which links to the sub-section 4.2, the need for social representation for LGBTI+ participants.

4.2 LGBTI+ participants asked for more representation

Among the participants that acknowledged the homoeroticism in the adverts, there is one point that distinguishes the LGBTI+ participants from the heterosexual ones. LGBTI+ participants want to see more representation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersex individuals. By ‘want more’, LGBTI+ participants expressed their disappointment with the adverts, wishing there would be more portrayal of same-sex relationships in advertising. According to them, these adverts are not explicit enough compared to opposite-sex couples in advertising. They feel the media do not dare to represent same-sex couples as much as heterosexual ones. LGBTI+ participants feel quite offended, assuming brands want to keep same-sex couples in the closet.

On this topic, Noel from focus group 1 said “if they're trying to sell gay relationship then that's perhaps not a smart move that they kinda... didn't sexualise them enough”. Noel assumed those brands wanted to promote same-sex couples and she found the lack of intimacy and sexuality in the adverts quite

ridiculous. Intimacy and sexuality need to be more explicit to denote a same-sex couple. According to Noel, brands did not make an intelligent choice, since advertising just like television is a mirror and a window where people can reflect in. This under-representation can be degrading since LGBTI+ people feel less important, and must thus be improved on media channels (Vir, Hall and Foye, 2018). The representation of opposite-sex relationships is common and ordinary as Irene explained “in heterosexual commercials, it’s men without shirts kissing women who smell delicious because of perfume” but when it comes to same-sex relationships “you have two gay men or something and they’re just... staring at each other kinda close”. Irene found a way to make fun of it, but under-representation is surely offending individuals (Vir, Hal and Foye, 2018). The need for role models and representation is crucial and especially for minorities such as LGBTI+ individuals. This example shows that media channels do not dare to openly represent them and this is offending LGBTI+ participants. That is also why Noel is making fun of it. However, she also expressed some anger saying “in fact, some people [LGBTI+] can interpret it as ‘oh so you’re sexualising heterosexual relationships but what about us, we don’t have sex or something?!’. She felt LGBTI+ people are undervalued and “ just put in the closet like [they’re] just close friends...”. This can be linked to the explanation of Asad Dhunna (Singh, 2017) an LGBTI+ Muslim advocate, writer and a member of PrideAM. She blames many advertisements not to represent LGBTI+ individuals enough. She takes the example of the Lloyd advert where a gay couple is displayed but we do not see them kissing, just hugging. Asad Dhunna said: “I can just see the advertiser deciding ‘Ooh, the same-sex couple can hug, maybe not kiss’”. The advert then displays heterosexual couples kissing. In this case, most heterosexual consumers do not notice the gay couple since they do not notice the ‘gay codes’, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim (Clark, 1993, p. 188 cited in Sender, 1999).

Overall, LGBTI+ participants from all groups showed their disappointment, Timel from focus group 1, for example, disheartedly said “[I] don’t feel like there is a sexual vibe”, Irene from the same group “they (the models) are not even touching” and Noel said, “I hug my friends like that”. Those statements demonstrate a real need for more LGBTI+ portrayal in advertising since participants feel cloistered. In fact, Ady from focus group 1 summarised which is, according to her a problem, stating “through these adverts brands exclusively speak to LGBTI+ individuals”. She means brands do not want to display homosexuality to the public, this is why they use homoeroticism. Besides, she added “only if you can read between the lines”. She then said: “we [brands] are open to you [LGBTI+ people] but only if you know what we mean”. This correlates with Sender (2003) who proved the camouflage or removal of sexual advertising in gay and lesbian advertisements.

However, some LGBTI+ participants recognised it was perhaps good these adverts were not overly sexualised. Ady, from focus group 1 said: “maybe it’s not such a bad thing they’re not over sexualising it”. Those adverts show that sex, for once, might not be needed to sell (Sender, 2003).

Hence, LGBTI+ participants feel cloistered in these adverts and advertising in general. They are demanding more social representation, more role models, more people to identify with. They are complaining of the lack of sexuality displayed when it comes to same-sex couples. They overall felt that brands purposefully refused to fully represent LGBTI+ individuals. Is it to avoid backlash from the general public, which could negatively impact their image and thus decline their sales? This link to the next subsection, did participants feel that brands are honestly trying to represent a broader audience or are just following a trend?

4.3 When the adverts look fake, the social representation is biased

This sub-section first emphasise the fact that participants understood that the representation of LGBTI+ individuals has become a marketing trend (Singh, 2017). Second, if this representation looks ‘forced’, it is perceived as offending for LGBTI+ individuals and does not give a good social representation. In this case, the social representation is biased and displays an opposite message. The brand is thus seen as using the LGBTI+ representation as a selling point.



Figure 1. Presentation of all adverts numerated.

The representation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex people is - to some extent - perceived as a trend, even in LGBTI+ people's eyes. Noel, from focus group 1 said: "it's almost like a trend". Participants, both heterosexual and LGBTI+, often perceived the homoerotic appeal of the adverts shown as trendy, they were aware that in recent years the explicit representation of LGBTI+ individuals in advertising has risen (Nölke, 2018). Irene, from focus group 1 expressed "it felt so overdone, like 'hey, we do this (displaying homoeroticism) too', just to sell and nothing more", she added that this representation looked forced and not legit, especially talking about advert #3: "they're really forcing the "hey we're so open and we have different sexuality in our photo campaign event though it still feels like... forced, and not like... legit". The 'still' emphasises on the fact that brands are trying to represent LGBTI+ individuals but the results remain insufficient, not enough and disappointing.

According to participants, the Abercrombie and Fitch adverts looked more natural than the others. The question of the naturalness of the models is important since it naturalness gives a feeling of sincerity and transparency, thus, a true social representation. Regala, from focus group 2 expressed that "the Abercrombie and Fitch ones are the ones that look the most genuine in a way cause the rest look too much like modeling". Her neighbour at the table, Hallie, thought that "advert #3 from Abercrombie & Fitch looks like they're posing but a bit more natural than advert #2 from Chloé". In focus group 3, Sunje felt that the adverts #4 from Calvin Klein and #10 from Abercrombie & Fitch "[are] just for the camera it's like obvious". As explained in the methods, this focus group was given an extra advert, the Tom Ford #6A. The models are physically closer but in the end, according to participants, the homoerotic appeal is missing. Danny said "it looks really fake like this [#6A], to me, kind of look fake, it doesn't look natural, [...], they look uncomfortable", she then added "it's just kind of feel like it's there because they feel like they should do it, but it doesn't fit...", Alene agreed, mentioning "yeah it's kinda there for no reason". The expression "for no reason" emphasises in that case that the advert does not look natural, it looks forced and wrong, hence, there is no feeling of intimacy. Alene also said "But for example, if I compare 6A to 10 in my perspective, I would not expect 6A, you know, they're very close. I wouldn't. I don't know. It seems more stage more... less intimacy".

Overall, forcing the intimacy between models in the adverts did not enhance the homoerotic appeal. Charlene, from focus group 3 said "it's not what you should look for intimacy at all!" talking about #6A. According to this group, the models look more distant than intimate "it seems like they're just kind of... like in solidarity, I guess like in womanhood, like a friendly kiss!". She pinpoints the fact the models feel more friends than lovers. They thus do not acknowledge homoeroticism in this advert.

In general, the participants, especially the LGBTI+ ones, felt the adverts looked 'forced', and thus looked fake when the brand was trying to display more intimacy. If an advert looks fake and not natural, there is no feeling of intimacy between the models. The lack of intimacy or erotic appeal restrict the audience to imagine a love relationship. There is hence no LGBTI+ relationship perceived in these

adverts and the social representation is biased. In that case, the targeted audience - which is LGBTI+ individuals - might think such a campaign is launched exclusively to sell.

Timel, from focus 1 specified “honestly there are also brands really open to everyone and they legit mean it! And you’ve got brands that use it to sell”. Timel emphasises an important point here; it is complex to determine what purpose the brands tend to accomplish through these adverts, the purpose is ambiguous. “There is a thin line, it’s very tricky” added Timel, “I know brands that at the beginning were not accepting a lot of people or a lot of subject groups but now because the times are changing they wanna go with the trend as well, then they also start using homosexuals in their adverts”. Through this statement, Timel shares that, some brands which were before not supporting LGBTI+ people have now started to display them in their campaign because it is a trend. However, Timel also mentioned some brands are honestly supporting the cause “but also sometimes brands change and start accepting people for real so... it’s hard”. It is therefore difficult to understand if brands are progressive and truly willing to represent all people as a wish for social representation, or whether brands are doing it for the sake of the trend and because it sells (Saunders, 1996). A combination of both could also be possible. Besides, after all, the first objective of advertising is indeed, to sell.

Participants showed they were well aware of this point. “I’m not sure they’re trying to appeal to like... gay people here, [...] more just kind of being edgy” said Sunje. Being edgy is something some brands are looking for, as Cliffe and Motion (2005) specified, delivering ‘spontaneous, cool, and edgy’ essence appeal to the youth, and thus sells. Participants are thus aware that advertising remains a channel for marketing ploys (Ellman and Germano, 2009) and its main purpose is “selling stuff” as stated by Irene in focus group 1. Therefore, although social representation in advertising has been improved, the representation of LGBTI+ people - as well as other minorities - remains mainly a selling point. Ady, for example, said: “I think this is a huge selling point in terms of advertisement, heteronormative people, Caucasian people I think it’s just a strong message of what they selling and even they don’t do it on purpose.... like, I think it’s just part of advertising”. Ingel, from focus group 1, summarised the subject, explaining that advertising is a game of profit, what rules a lot on what will get done and what will get shown.

Nevertheless, participants, even LGBTI+ ones, remain quite positive towards the social representation advertisements are nowadays offering. They believe some improvements in how gender and sexuality are represented are being made. In focus group 1, when being asked if they think those adverts are promising in term of social representation - or exclusively to sell, Timel replied “both”, prove they are positive about the topic.

The last point that must be mentioned in this sub-section is how, quite surprisingly, heterosexual participants recognised homoerotic adverts could appeal more to LGBTI+ individuals. In fact, some heterosexual participants clearly felt and understood that those adverts could appear more homosexual to gay people. In term of social representation, straight participants realised LGBTI+ individuals would pay

more attention to what they feel close to, what they feel connected to, and thus, this type of homoerotic adverts (Sender, 1999). To explain their point, participants used other topics than the LGBTI+ one, such as Alene, in focus group 3 who expressed that she thinks “especially for me, because in America the ‘black lives matter’ movement is so huge right now, [...] I try to find the racial meaning behind things. Like I think I feel like advertising like in a way is trying to shed light or sit on like big issues like that. And so I guess I see that more”. Through this statement, Alene explained she would pay more attention to the representation of African Americans since it is a topic she follows and is more aware of. She hence demonstrates each person pays attention to themes they are interested in because it concerns them specifically. From focus group 4, Ary explained the same argument with another example;

“I would say they (LGBTI+ people) would most likely be able to notice those ads. Because for instance, I am [...] Indian myself so I see Indian models in the advertisement [...] I would notice that first! Probably people with a different nationality just focus on the clothes and brand but I will notice the Indian. [...], so similarly if a gay person sees two men in advertisement and men shirtless and hugging each other or something like that. I think they would be the first to notice”.

From the same focus group, Hawai also believes that the people you are surrounded by influence your perception. He said, “If you're interacting with people who have, who share like the same ideologies as you or same attitudes towards gender relations, you'd say then it's easier for you to build upon more”. In that sense, Hawai assumes that people of the same community - in this context the LGBTI+ community - are more likely to perceive the same point. He continues “if you look at #9 [The Man's Store], if I was just looking at it objectively, I just see it as two men who were just conversing or something. But if someone else was in an environment where they're like hanging out with people who have different gender relations [i.e LGBTI+ individuals] they can have different interpretations of it”. Ary also agreed with his neighbour on this point “I think people of that community might find it or might see it [in] that [homoerotic] way”. From focus group 3, Danny considered this argument as well, supposing “If it's familiar for you, I assume it's nice to think they're gay!”.

Following the same point, some heterosexuals admitted these adverts were not attractive to them but would be, if they were representing straight couples. Nick, from focus group 4 said: “if they are the same gender I kind of like... don't care but if it's like a man and a woman like... and a very sexualised advertisement then like... it would have an effect on me”. This comment shows once again the attraction to people or stories that you can feel connected to, that represent you (Sender, 1999).

Nonetheless, it is important to notice the acknowledgment of homoeroticism is not only a matter of sexual orientation but more a matter of generation. In fact, as Alene said “I think it's also the generation... like you don't have to be bisexual or gay to like “see” that and relate to it [...], what I'm trying to say is like I feel like I can relate to a gay relationship even though I'm straight like you know what I mean?”. Through this argument, Alene explains millennials are in essence an open-minded and progressive generation which care about the social representation of minorities (Main, 2013) such as

LGBTI+. In that sense, participants also agreed to notice homoeroticism in an advert does not just depend on your sexual orientation. People or stories close to you can be influencing your perception.

This connects to the sub-section 4.4 of the results which expounds when homoeroticism was less -or not - acknowledged. This part demonstrates generation imports more than sexual orientation regarding the perception of homoeroticism in these adverts.

4.4 The acknowledgment is not a matter of sexual orientation

As aforementioned, homoeroticism was acknowledged by most of the participants, although LGBTI+ and heterosexual individuals occasionally had a different way to perceive it. In some cases heterosexual participants did not acknowledge homoeroticism, in some others, LGBTI+ participants did not. Sexual orientation does not seem to be the most influential factor to the acknowledgement of homoeroticism, participants discussed the importance of generation, this part elaborates on it.

Heterosexual participants were most likely not to notice homoerotic appeal in the adverts shown but as aforementioned, findings proved the opposite. However, Olaf, a heterosexual participant in group 2 was asked how can he interpret the closeness of the models in the adverts. He replied “some of them look closer than others...some are touching arms or stuff and some just standing there”. He perceived no sexual emotion, no love feeling, no acknowledgement of anything erotic between the models. Although he sat in the middle of LGBTI+ individual who emphasised on ‘intimate connections’ and ‘eroticism’, he is off topic, being quite a lot on his phone, not giving much interest on the topic, probably because it does not understand what this focus group is all about. He also added “the advert #3 those two guys look like genuine friends almost like they're at a picnic and they've known each other for a while. So they're comfortable just like laying up against each other”. This comment definitely shows Olaf did not acknowledge the homoeroticism in those adverts.

Olaf was the only participants not acknowledgement homoeroticism at all. However, some participants that did acknowledge homoeroticism in some adverts, did not in some others.

In focus group 4, Alene was a heterosexual participant that off and on acknowledged homoeroticism. She expressed ‘I feel like 10 is less like intimate and it almost kind of looks like intimidating. Like the guy I mean the guy looks angry like... and he looks like he's just about to start a fight’. This statement shows homoeroticism is not acknowledged.

Hawai, in focus group 4, declared not to see much intimacy in these adverts which demonstrates the participant was not much sensitive to the homoerotic appeal displayed. However, he was aware and understood the topic of homoeroticism that was discussed, unlike Olaf. However, his neighbor Nick suggested to him “I mean I don't think we [as heterosexual guys] noticed it”, a statement that refers to the fact explained above: LGBTI+ are more likely to perceive a homoerotic appeal in those adverts.

These findings mentioned cases where heterosexual participants did not acknowledged loads of homoeroticism, however, at times, LGBTI+ participants as well doubted the homoerotic appeal. Regala, a bisexual participant mentioned about advert the Abercrombie & Fitch advert #4 “it feels like just a photo shoot”. She here means that, according to her, the advert looks fake and made only for the photo. Although she showed interest in the advert saying “there is a connection but still kinda cold”, her global perception of the advert was quite platonic.

Contrary to the work of Sender (1999), this study shows that the perception of homoeroticism does not depend much on individuals’ sexual orientation. In 1999, Sender’s study proved sexual orientation had a bigger influence on people’s reading of homoeroticism than now. Hence, since Sender’s (1999) study was conducted 20 years ago, the question of generation was thus raised and asked across the different focus groups. On one hand, some participants assumed other generations, and especially talking about the older ones, would not acknowledge homoeroticism since it would not even cross their minds. Danny, from focus group 3 suggested older generations would think “it’s just like two gal pals”. On the other hand, some participants assumed older generations would notice homoeroticism more since they are not used to such intimacy depicted between same-sex people. In other words, since it is more shocking according to them, they would pay more attention to it. Timel, from focus group 1 said “I think it’s very based on your worldview. Like if you’re less tolerance toward maybe...homosexuals, then maybe you notice it more quickly”. This comment implies perception depends on individuals more than on factors. Nick, from a different focus group, focus group 4, also thought the same, assuming “[if] I’m a person who disagrees with homosexuality [...] if I see people of the same gender maybe I would care more and I’d be like... ‘what the fuck!’ yeah”.

Although the question of the generation has not been explored during this study, the overall feeling that came out of it suggests that the perception of homoeroticism possibly depends more on people’s generation and personal experience than on people’s sexual orientation. This result thus does not really align with what Sender (1999) declared: “If heterosexual consumers do not notice [the] subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim”. This hypothesis does not apply completely to this research since the perception of homoeroticism was most of the time acknowledged by heterosexual participants as well.

However, participants’ sexual orientation has sometimes played a role in the perception of homoeroticism, yet sometimes did not. The last sub-section will thus explain how can brands take advantage of this ambiguity.

4.5 Homoeroticism can benefit to brands

LGBTI+ and heterosexuals participants both assumed that keeping the intimate appeal ambiguous would be smarter for brands. Roxane, from focus group 1 suggested: “the mystery is the thing that is

selling, as the selling point". Though this statement Roxane assumes the mystery can also attract the eye of the audience, for both heterosexual and LGBTI+ individuals. This is correlated to what Sender (1999) said, the fact that flagrant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the erotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential.

Although society has become more tolerant, participants mentioned that keeping homoeroticism and homosexuality ambiguous to the public might be smart for companies to avoid any homophobic backlash. Sender (1999) also supposed the same, the fact that heterosexual consumers would not notice the 'gay codes' would allow advertisers to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim. Hallie, a bisexual participant from focus group 2 expressed "it's maybe like... with brands it's important they're not that explicit about it and that there is some ambiguity because you know, it is a controversial topic [...] that kind of explicit statements cause controversy". From group 4, Danny raised some historical scandal that recently happened in the Netherlands saying "I also think like advertisers have to keep it that way cause I remember in the Netherlands, Suit supply released two men like obviously homosexual and like there was so much backlash. Yeah, so like people still aren't ready. So yeah, they have to give hints of it I guess and like kind of leave it up to interpretations".



Figure 4. Sample of Suit Supply's advertising campaign in February 2018.

Tim concluded: "I think like an example is number #5 from Ron Dorff, it honestly could have just been the two guys because she doesn't really add that much to the advertising she's honestly pretty plain but then they added her as well too, I guess to appeal to a broader audience and to make it less like stigmatising". Through this comment, he summarizes how brands can benefit of the use of homoeroticism among other approaches is their advertising to reach diverse audiences.

5. Conclusion

LGBTI+ and heterosexuals participants both assumed that keeping the intimate appeal ambiguous would be smarter for brands. Roxane, from focus group 1 suggested: "the mystaThis study demonstrates that, in 2019, individuals' sexual orientation does not play an important role in the acknowledgement of homoeroticism in advertising. Young adults aged 18-25 with different sexual orientations acknowledged homoeroticism the same way. However, some differences of perception have been observed between heterosexual and LGBTI+ participants.

People who have participated in the focus groups live in Rotterdam and have a similar level of education. In all groups, people acknowledged a homoerotic appeal in the adverts. Sexual orientation has not played a role, this research thus concludes that the perception of homoeroticism could be more a matter of generation, level of education and personal experience than a matter of sexual orientation. Young millennials are more likely to be open-minded and progressive. For most of them, homosexuality is not unconventional sexuality. People who participated in Sender's (1999) study were from another generation, which can explain how results are now different. Indeed, the results of this thesis are opposed to what Sender (1999) and Oakenfull (2007) found. Both researchers discovered that the sexual orientation of their participants had played a role in the acknowledgment and perception of homoeroticism. LGBTI+ participants were acknowledging homoeroticism more often than heterosexual. This research has shown the opposite, LGBTI+ have not acknowledged homoeroticism more often than heterosexual participants, which reveal an important switch. This research thus contributes to previous research, updating people's attitudes and way of thinking towards homoeroticism in advertising.

Homoeroticism was clearly acknowledged by LGBTI+ and heterosexual participants. Participants' sexual orientation did not influence the acknowledgement of homoeroticism. Sexual orientation has however played a role in people's perception of it. LGBTI+ participants felt underrepresented and did not find sufficient the homoerotic appeal displayed in the adverts. LGBTI+ participants declared that eroticism was not explicit enough compared to the erotic appeal displayed between opposite-sex models in other advertisements. LGBTI+ participants criticized brands for their lack of diversity and acceptance. They sometimes however admitted that less eroticism in advertising could be a good thing since advertising is known to be over sexualising people - and women especially. LGBTI+ participants also mentioned the importance of LGBTI+ people in the media which expresses a need for models and social representation. Heterosexual participants acknowledged homoeroticism but were however less engaged on the topic, pinpointing other aspects of the adverts, For example, an American heterosexual participant following the "Black Lives Matter" debate paid attention to black models and the way their were represented. Participants hence noticed details that were relevant to them,

Media, business and society are very animated on the topic of homosexuality. All participants, heterosexual and LGBTI+, pinpointed the fact that homoeroticism is not accepted as broadly as the younger generations tend to believe. Especially older or less educated generations might find homosexuality unconventional (Haavio-Mannila, Roos and Kontula, 1996). The ambiguity of the adverts shown leave room for interpretations. In other words, the ambiguity might allow brands to use homoeroticism to appeal to gay, lesbians and bisexuals without backlash from society.

On the business side, the use of homoeroticism for communication campaigns divided the participants. When the question of possible backlash from a wider audience was raised some of the participants thought older generations could see these adverts as shocking. On the other hand, some of the participants assumed older generations would not acknowledge homoeroticism in these adverts since it would not even cross their mind. These two types of reactions were independent from people's sexual orientations.

5.1 Limitations

The results showed how young adults aged 18-25 perceive homoeroticism in advertising but this analysis also showed some limits. Three main limitations were established, which are discussed below.

The first limitation that must be mentioned is the fact that all adverts displayed together may have strengthened the homoerotic aspect. Participants were asked if they would have perceived homoeroticism the same way if the adverts were seen separately. The overall answer was pretty negative with participants pointing out that gathering all these homoerotic images strengthened the perception of intimacy between the models. Danny, from focus group 3 expressed “with only advert #5 from Ron Dorff, I could’ve thought “oh it’s a quirky ad” but like I wouldn’t have thought of it anyway in like intimacy until like you see like Tom Ford #6A or Abercrombie & Fitch #3. That’s why, that’s only why I started to feel intimacy. But otherwise, I wouldn’t have thought of it at all”. We can conclude through this comment that homoeroticism has been strengthened by certain adverts more homoerotic than others. Charlene, from the same group said: “Maybe we see this as... a bit over friendly now, but maybe because we see them [the ads] all together”. Ary, a straight participant from the last group mentioned this limit as well “Honestly, I wouldn’t have noticed because you keep encountering such ads again, and again that has become completely normal whether sexual or not sexual and also you wouldn’t care... eventually, you know?”. This comment also proves that Ary is indifferent to the sexual orientation of the models, which accentuate the findings that perception of homoeroticism is more a matter of personal experience than a matter of sexual orientation. Ary also raised a point linked to the second limit, the fact that advertising is not followed by younger generations as much as it used to be by the older ones.

The second limitation concerned the fact that participants admitted not to especially care about advertising. These young millennials declared not to pay attention to printed adverts. They follow their

favorite role models and influencers on Youtube and Instagram, which are thus now determining assets for brands (Booth and Matic, 2011). They are wearing the trends young adults will wear tomorrow. Millennials are facing a lot of information every day and they must select it (Million, O'Hare, Lowrance and Erdelez, 2013). In other words, they do not pay attention to random models they do not know on a printed advert. They would focus on the clothes if they like them but not on the models. Their favorite models and role models will however be followed on social media. Hallie, from focus group 2 demonstrates this point saying: "I only pay attention to clothes, not really the people". Timel, from focus group 1 "I think most ads are pretty, it's pretty easy to focus on the clothes instead of the people". He also added "if it's not anorexia, if it's not hurting anybody, then I'm fine". This meta-comment shows that Timel stepped back and analysed the context in terms of ethics. Overall, 'forcing' participants to look at the adverts in the focus groups proved to be quite artificial. Bringing adverts all together and asked for opinions might sound a bit odd. People agreed on the fact advertising is everywhere and has an impact, on kids for instance, who are more vulnerable and sensitive. Timel said: "they [kids] subconsciously think about it cause it's everywhere, they'll see all the images". Participants believe advertising displays exclusively what they are used to display, and most of the times it does not represent minorities - such as LGBTI+. Irene, from focus group 2 explained: "there is not only this, there is a lot more possible and I think it's important they [children] know it". This limitation shows that participants believe advertising does not mirror individuals of the society, and furthermore, when it does, participants demonstrated they have difficulties to believe it. Participants expressed they find complicated to assume a relationship from a picture. "I think it's very difficult to assume like an explicit relationship from an image unless it's like they're actually kissing or I don't know maybe holding hands..." said Ady, a bisexual participant. This comment is linked to the media effects theory saying people can have a passive attitude towards media messages (Hanson, 2016).

The last limitation shows it was somehow quite complicated for participants to engage and assume their views. Both LGBTI+ and heterosexual participants have difficulties to express their opinions. When Hallie, from focus group 2, was asked what she means by 'they look intimate', she replied: "intimate in a way that like there... They're closer together. So I don't know you would assume that maybe... you can assume a different relationship like not, not in... and like I don't mean like oh they're in a...". She was turning around the topic of homosexuality without expressing her opinion. The moderator intervened "well, you can say words like... if you mean 'homosexuality' or..." she straight away retracted her observations and replied "not necessarily sexual intimacy. Just like you know, there's more like...". No proper explanation was given. She seemed scared to raise the topic of homosexuality although she openly said being bisexual. This type of reaction was spotted a couple of times in different focus groups showing that participants, even if openly gay or bisexual can still find it difficult to talk about the topic of homoeroticism and homosexuality.

These limitations revealed diverse gaps around people's perception of homoeroticism that derived from the findings which could interest further research, including the profit companies can obtain with the use of homoeroticism in their advertising. Is homoeroticism truly benefiting brands? To answer this question fully, brands which have used homoeroticism could be interviewed. The business side has not been analysed in this research, it would be interesting to understand what brands think about it. Do they have a genuine desire to represent society as a whole, do they follow a trend - or both? Are brands recognizing homoeroticism to avoid backlash from wider audiences? Those questions could be asked in further research, although the truth might be inaccessible.ery is the thing that is selling, as the selling point". Though this statement Roxane assumes the mystery can also attract the eye of the audience, for both heterosexual and LGBTI+ individuals. This is correlated to what Sender (1999) said, the fact that flagrant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the erotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential.

Although society has become more tolerant, participants mentioned that keeping homoeroticism and homosexuality ambiguous to the public might be smart for companies to avoid any homophobic backlash. Sender (1999) also supposed the same, the fact that heterosexual consumers would not notice the 'gay codes' would allow advertisers to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim. Hallie, a bisexual participant from focus group 2 expressed "it's maybe like... with brands it's important they're not that explicit about it and that there is some ambiguity because you know, it is a controversial topic [...] that kind of explicit statements cause controversy". From group 4, Danny raised some historical scandal that recently happened in the Netherlands saying "I also think like advertisers have to keep it that way cause I remember in the Netherlands, Suit supply released two men like obviously homosexual and like there was so much backlash. Yeah, so like people still aren't ready. So yeah, they have to give hints of it I guess and like kind of leave it up to interpretations".

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Appendix 1

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Questions:

1. I am going to give you ten adverts, there are numerated to ease the discussion. Let's start the discussion by talking about what you see in these adverts. Please tell me anything you are noting, there is right or wrong answer. Do you see any correlation between these adverts?
2. Do you think they could be more sexualized?
3. You are young educated people from the city, what do you think older generations, less educated people or children could think of these adverts?
4. Do you think these adverts show diversity in terms of social representation?
5. What is for you the purpose of advertising?
6. How would you define the relationship between the models?
7. What do you mean by 'closer than other'?
8. What do you mean by ambiguity and mystery'?
9. Hence you think these adverts could be more sexualized?
10. Which one look more natural to you?
11. So you say you can interpret it as gay, you can interpret it as straight, can you develop?
12. Are these adverts appealing to you?
13. Would you have seen such an intimate relationship between the models if seen the adverts separately?
14. Do you think your perception of eroticism can depend of your background, your experiences?
15. Do you believe showing blatant homosexuality can have consequences on your brand image?
16. Does someone want to add something else?

Probes for Discussion:

- *Intimacy/Closeness*
- *Homoeroticism*
 - *Acknowledged by LGBTI+*
 - *Not acknowledged by heterosexuals*
- *Social representation*
 - *Need for identification*
 - *Diverse and good representation*
 - *Importance of personal experience*
- *Business*
 - *Benefit to brands*
 - *Backlash*

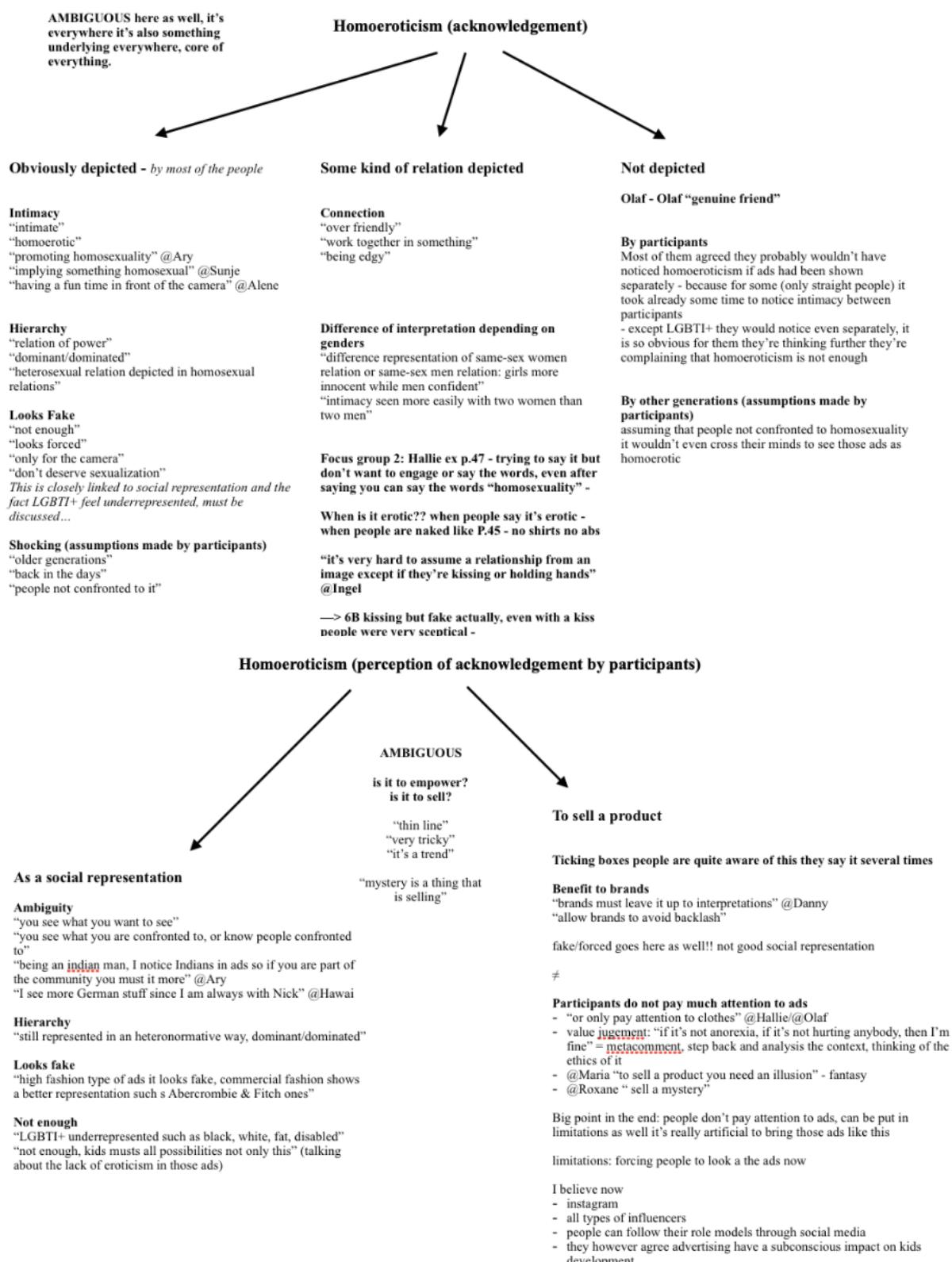
That concludes our focus group. Thank you so much for coming and sharing your thoughts and opinions. If you wish to withdraw you can still do it at any time, same if you want me to delete any comment you have made.

Materials and supplies for focus groups

- Demographic informations sheet
- Consent forms (one copy for participants, one copy for the researcher)
- Name tents
- Pencils for each participant
- Focus Group Discussion Guide for moderator
- 1 phone to record
- Charger for the phone
- Notebook for note-taking
- Refreshments and snacks

Appendix 2

Charts



Appendix 3

Participant Consent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study about gender representation in advertising. We hope to learn how young adults living in Rotterdam react to advertising. The researcher can tell you more about the topic in the end of the discussion.

Participant Selection: You were selected as a participant in this study because you meet the participant recruitment criteria. Participant criteria targeted heterosexuals, bisexuals, homosexuals - or any sexual orientation. Approximately 20 participants will participate in this study.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to participate, after signing this consent form, you will:

- 1) Be asked to fill out a demographic information form, which includes a sexual orientation assessment. This step will be used to complement the data collected from the focus group. Completing this step will not take more than 2 minutes.
- 2) Upon completion of the sexual orientation assessment and demographic information, a small game will be organised to get to know you - and other participants.
- 3) Then you will be shown 10 advertisements. The advertisements will entail a conversational discussion between you and the other participants. The focus group will take 30 to 45 minutes. With your permission, we would like to record the discussion with a phone.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

The researcher may publish the results of the study. If they do, they will only discuss study results. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study. All audio recordings from interviews will be deleted from the recording devices after transcriptions are completed. Upon completion of the study, all electronic files of the audio recordings, including notes taken during interviews, will be deleted from the researcher's computer.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Contact: If you have any questions about this research study, you can contact me at:

Flavie MARIE-DABIN

flavie.marie.d@gmail.com

+33769023139

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction,
- You have voluntarily decided to participate. You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form.
You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Name of Subject _____

Date:

In addition to agreeing to participate, your signature indicates that you consent to having your interview audio recorded.

Signature:

Appendix 4

Demographic variables

What's your age?

What's your nationality?

What's your sex/gender?

What's your sexual orientation?
