

# **“Taste the Rainbow”**

An analysis of the perception towards LGBTQ+ advertisements in a  
conservative country

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Master's Thesis  
*June 2022*

## ABSTRACT

*In contemporary society there exists a huge amount of hatred towards multiple minorities, especially the ones who are against the society's norms, one great example being the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, this level of judgement is amplified in conservative and traditionalist countries where the community is rarely accepted, such as Romania. However, previous scholars have demonstrated in Western cultures that exposure to such diverse messages and images can influence the level of acceptance of a society. Simultaneously, in societies nowadays, the greatest form of exposure is through media representation, for instance TV shows, movies as well as advertisements. Therefore, this study focuses on the influence that advertisements in which people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum can have on Romanian society and on the community based on the perceptions of two categories of sexual orientation, respectively straight and non-straight people. Due to the far-right legislation which defines Romanian society, it is undeniable that the LGBTQ+ community might be negatively seen by the general public. Additionally, due to the capitalist world that we live in, companies might perpetuate the whole movement which can worsen even more the situation in Romania. However, by conducting a thematic analysis, this study seeks to determine whether Romania society can follow a similar progressive trend as Western societies by promoting advertisements in which the LGBTQ+ is represented. With a data set derived from 12 interviews, the difference in perceptions of straight and non-straight participants is analysed. The findings from the analysis include the acknowledged negative perception of Romanian society towards the LGBTQ+ community, the internalised homophobia which occurs as an effect of this hatred and the harmful stereotypes present in the average Romanian's belief system as well as in the Romanian advertising world. More than that, the acknowledged benefits of the LGBTQ+ community which materialise from the companies' involvement as well as the constructive influence on the society consisted of the main findings of the research. Some of the limitations of the study which were found are related to the little diversity in regards to participants' demographics which can influence their mentality as well as the limited number of advertisements present in Romania. Hence, a further study is vital which includes a larger number of participants from all around Romania and with distinct demographics such as region, education, gender, age and so on.*

**KEYWORDS:** LGBTQ+ Advertisements, Rainbow Capitalism, Advertising, LGBTQ+ Representation, Advertising Attitudes

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	2
<b>1. Introduction</b>	5
1.1. Aim of the research	7
1.2. Societal and scientific relevance	8
<b>2. Theoretical Framework</b>	10
2.1. Cultural Climate in Romania	10
2.2. Pride Month	12
2.3. People's perception towards different types of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising	14
2.3.1. Lesbian vs. Gay vs. Bisexual vs. Transgender Advertisements	14
2.3.2. Explicit vs. Implicit LGBTQ+ Advertisements	15
2.4. The phenomenon of Rainbow Capitalism	17
2.5. Societal Consequences of Advertising	19
<b>3. Methodology</b>	23
3.1. Research Design	23
3.2. Sampling and data collection	24
3.3. Data analysis	28
<b>4. Results and Discussion</b>	30
4.1. Perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements	31
4.1.1. Judgement and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community	32
4.1.2. Internalised Homophobia	34
4.1.3. Harmful stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community	35
4.1.4. The acceptance of the LGBTQ+ symbols as advertisements	37
4.2. Perception of the companies' involvement	38
4.2.1. The use of the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing strategy	38
4.2.2. The need for companies to take responsibility in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community	40
4.2.3. The need for constant involvement from the companies in promoting the LGBTQ+ community	41

<b>4.3. The impact of LGBTQ+ advertisements on society</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>4.3.1. The need for exposure to the LGBTQ+ advertisements in a closed-minded society</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4.3.2. Contribution in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Romania</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>5.1. Major Findings</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>5.2. Limitations and future research</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5.3. Strengths of the research</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>6. References</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>7. Appendices</b>	<b>62</b>
Appendix A - Interview Guide	62
Appendix B - Thematic Map	65

## 1. Introduction

Beyond question, LGBTQ+ people have been discriminated against in the last centuries, any deviation from the standard sexuality or gender roles universally assigned by the society were prohibited by law (Baggs, 2022; Morris, 2019). Even more so, such convictions were executed by the general population and the government through medical warnings and suggestions, public trials, harsh language, as well as, banishment from the society (Morris, 2019). Additionally, prior to the middle of the 1990's, people who were part of the LGBTQ+ community, not only were poorly depicted and misrepresented, but they were also hardly ever represented in traditional media and advertising (Padva, 2008). Despite the community still being massively underrepresented, especially in conservative and traditionalist states, there has, however, been seen a rise in the visibility and awareness of the LGBTQ+ community within the communications and marketing industry (Bond et al., 2009).

Accordingly, due to the constant ongoing social, political and cultural changes encountered in a society, multiple organisations are prone to adopt these transformations in their advertising campaigns as well considering their social responsibility in their effort to market to the mainstream audience and simultaneously to minority groups (Champlin & Li, 2020; McDonald et al., 2020). Consequently, as society illustrated a considerable progressive trend in the socio-cultural dimension in regards to individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer, universally known as the LGBTQ+ community, advertisers have also begun to openly demonstrate their support towards these sexual and gender groups. Whether it is by featuring videos portraying LGBTQ+ individuals on billboards or simply by depicting the community's symbols, the rainbow flag has become a global trend in the strategic mass communication initiatives, especially in countries which are historically known to be more accepting (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Champlin & Li, 2020).

As businesses have widely recognised their societal obligation of the promotion of advertisements in order to spread awareness of the LGBTQ+ population, the notion of "rainbow capitalism" has been constructed simultaneously by exploiting the community, also known as "pinkwashing" (Champlin & Li, 2020). Due to the fact that advertisers have one fundamental goal established, respectively to grow their companies and therefore accumulate wealth, a large number of organisations tend to only capitalise on the LGBTQ+

community by fabricating their support of the people who are part of the spectrum (Falco & Gandhi, 2019; Champlin & Li, 2020). While there have been companies who have profoundly displayed their genuine advocacy for the community – such as Converse, that has donated the income gained from their Pride collection to groups where LGBTQ+ people benefit from, like the “It Gets Better Project” – this is not always the global reality (Street, 2021). Conversely, there have also been organisations such as Adidas that released their Pride pack campaign containing clothes with the LGBTQ+ symbols, but they were also one of the primary sponsors to the World Cup when it was held in Russia (Score and Change, 2017; Falco & Gandhi, 2019). Russia’s anti-LGBTQ+ legislations made the public question Adidas’s corporate and capitalistic gestures of loyalty and support for the people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities (Falco & Gandhi, 2019).

Furthermore, although the representation of the people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities is greater in more progressive and democratic countries, this movement has also begun to be embraced by developing countries in the Eastern part of Europe as well. One example is Romania, which represents one of the former countries who has suffered from the illiberal and traditionalist reforms enforced during the communist era (Margarit, 2019). Although Romania is still influenced nowadays by its post-communist values and its prior discriminating legislations, a study conducted by ACCEPT Romania (2021a) illustrates that in today’s world, 75% of Romanians consider that it is crucial to be respectfully treated regardless of a person’s sexual orientation. As the Romanian society’s perception of the LGBTQ+ community becomes more fluid, stereotypes will be destroyed while also replacing the traditional ideologies and social norms in a conservative country. Advertisers also take part in the growing progressiveness of the society, with organisations in Romania following a similar movement in the future as the one in the Western societies, such as the United States, Sweden and so on (Champlin & Li, 2020).

As LGBTQ+ people are progressively being more represented in media and advertising and targeted by a larger number of companies worldwide, the reactions from the consumers usually vary. While the rational and emotional response can be positive, there can also occur multiple backlashes towards the brand and towards the community (Bond et al., 2009). For instance, in 2014, the American snack producer, Honey Maid, promoted in their advertisement the slogan “This is Wholesomeness”, alongside celebrating various types of families, same-sex couples being featured as well (Stampler, 2014). However, they have

suffered massive repercussions from the public, receiving numerous hateful comments on their social media platforms (Stampler, 2014). Nonetheless, multiple other customers were of the opinion that the advertisement was indeed, wholesome and heartfelt (Block, 2014). Even more so, studies have determined that in countries where the cultural society has been historically led by radical and supremacist regulations and values, similar to Romania, the advertisements where homosexual-related images and messages are displayed, have a more unfavorable response from the majority of the public (Champlin & Li, 2020). For this reason, after one of the largest companies in India released an advertisement portraying a couple of two women, not only did the country's population react negatively to seeing it, but also right-wing leaders threatened the company with a legal process unless the advertisement was not taken down (Sharma, 2021).

### **1.1. Aim of the research**

While several scholars have examined the mixed reactions that people have towards LGBTQ+ advertisements, there is still little knowledge on how such advertising affects consumers in a post-communist country, such as Romania. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the research question: *'What is the attitude of straight and non-straight people from Romania towards LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month?'*. Since Pride Month represents the month where the LGBTQ+ people are being widely celebrated, I have decided to focus on advertisements during this period because it may form an incentive for companies to support the community for profit purposes. More than that, it is undeniable that people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum have had distinct experiences than straight people due to their internal defensive battle with themselves as a result of their sexual orientation. Therefore, I believe that it is essential to make a comparison between the two groups to understand whether their personal involvement in the movement can influence their attitudes.

The aim of the research is to examine how Romania's established values shapes how the society perceives homosexual-related images and messages and whether people notice the change that such advertisements bear. Thereby, to grasp the complexity of the research and to increase its feasibility, three sub-questions were formulated. The first sub-question, *'How are LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month perceived by straight and non-straight people in Romania?'* aims to analyse the relation between the current socio-cultural climate in the Eastern European country and various categories of such advertisements. The

second sub-question, *‘How genuine are organisations who promote LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month perceived by straight and non-straight people in Romania?’* is dedicated to discovering how people feel about organisations who are using LGBTQ+ advertising to leverage their buying power. And lastly, the third sub-question, *‘How have LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month improved the societal culture of the community in Romania?’* seeks to establish whether such advertisements have an influence on the socio-cultural development of Romanian society. To answer the main research question as well as the sub-questions, the study seeks to decipher the Romanian society’s perspectives on homosexual-related images and messages during the celebratory month of the community, based on conducting in-depth interviews with Romanian people from both groups.

## **1.2. Societal and scientific relevance**

The advertising world is notorious for its unethical doings: exploiting women’s rights, benefiting from racial injustices, as well as generating profit from minorities, such as the LGBTQ+ community (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). However, as previously mentioned, LGBTQ+ people have only recently started being acknowledged by society and by the media. Therefore, regardless of the capitalist motives to maximise revenue and profit, promoting advertisements featuring LGBTQ+ individuals is fundamentally relevant to society because the community has been continuously persecuted and historically oppressed in the last centuries, and now, it is the very first time when people from this community are proudly able to be seen and recognised by the society (Canaday, 2014). Even more so, media representation is serving as a means of promoting diversity and inclusion, in order to improve the image of the LGBTQ+ community, which might lead to minimizing the discrimination (Peñaloza, 1996). Therefore, the societal relevance is related to the idea that advertising such diverse messages in a country populated by a large number of traditionalist and conservative supporters, such as Romania, being essential due to the opportunity for people to be exposed to images outside of their guidelines and to adapt to progressive and liberal ideologies (Chung, 2007). More than that, is it also relevant to society to find out whether and how companies should engage in LGBTQ+ advertising in a way to accurately represent and help the community.

Additionally, this research is scientifically relevant due to the focus on observing the attitudes of people from an unprogressive Eastern European country towards LGBTQ+



advertisements, as most studies concentrating on progressive countries such as Western European or North American countries (Cunningham & Melton, 2014; Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter explores the relationship between LGBTQ+ advertisements and their perceived impact on the community by straight and non-straight Romanians through an extensive evaluation of previous empirical sources, providing the conceptual framework of the research. Initially, in order to examine the perception of Romanian people towards LGBTQ+ advertisements, the current cultural climate regarding LGBTQ+ minorities in Romania will be described. A discussion of people's awareness of the presence of Pride Month in Romania and different types of LGBTQ+ advertisements follows. Moreover, relevant literature will be used to address the problematic effects of LGBTQ+ advertisements due to the capitalisation on the community. More than that, the expected responses of both straight and non-straight people will also be presented, which will help analyse whether pinkwashing has a positive or negative effect on the perception of the LGBTQ+ community in Romania. And lastly, by elaborating the possible consequences of these socio-dimensional advertisements adopted from prior scholarly work, witnessing the positive effects that previous advertising campaigns had on the progressiveness of Western countries in recent years will help identify whether LGBTQ+ advertisements can improve the perception of the community in Romania.

### **2.1. Cultural Climate in Romania**

In the 20th century, LGBTQ+ minorities have been repeatedly marginalised by a large number of people from the general population and have faced social stigmas, therefore, being considered the bottom of the social ladder. In the 1950's the American Psychiatric Association had even diagnosed homosexuality as a sociopathic mental and personality disorder (CNN Editorial Research, 2021). Undeniably, Western countries have experienced an earlier progressive wave in the context of LGBTQ+ rights, the Netherlands being the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage in 2001, the other Western European countries following suit in the next decade as well (Lubbers et al., 2009).

Although other European governments and institutions are in favour of respecting LGBTQ+ rights, the Romanian government remains constantly indolent in implementing public policies to legally recognise same-sex marriages or civil partnerships (ACCEPT Romania, 2020, 2021b). Since the collapse of the communist authorities, there have been several attempts to the reform fundamental human and political rights of the LGBTQ+

community, the most significant being the eradication in 2001 of the law which was criminalising homosexuality, respectively Article 200 which appeared in the Penal Code, imprisoning individuals who were engaging in homosexual relationships (Margarit, 2019). Considering that the ratification of such regulation was coming from Romania's pursuit of entering the European Union, conservative, socialist and traditionalist groups endorsed by the Orthodox and Neo-Protestant churches have tried to protect the national identity, hetero-normative standards as well as the traditional Christian family by using xenophobic, homophobic and nationalist measures (Margarit, 2019; Voiculescu & Groza, 2021). More than that, recently, Romania seems to be inclined to illiberal political parties with an extremist agenda, which incites hatred and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, being inspired by the anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Hungary (Deutsche Welle, 2021). As a consequence, in spite of Romania's civil code, which prohibits LGBTQ+ people from becoming legally married, in 2018, the political alliance which was governing at that time had also organised a referendum to redefine the definition of family in such a way that a same-sex marriage would not be approved in the constitution (Voiculescu & Groza, 2021). Nonetheless, the support for the community from the general population of Romania has been in an upward trend in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, and the referendum was invalidated due to the lack of votes in favour of adopting such legislation (Voiculescu & Groza, 2021). Therefore, although people in socially conservative Romania do not feel the change towards a more progressive socio-political dimension from the government, there has been a clear significant cultural climate change with people being more open and accepting towards these minority groups.

It is undeniable that despite this representing a general outlook on the rising support for the LGBTQ+ community, there is a distinctive attitude between the two segmented groups, respectively straight people and people who belong to one of the LGBTQ+ minorities. Non-straight people are prone to show a more supportive perspective towards LGBTQ+ mainstream media advertisements due to the feeling of inclusion, rather than straight people who might be expected to negatively react to such messages and create a public backlash due to the hetero-normative standards (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Oakenfull et al., 2008). Furthermore, prior papers on identity and sexuality in the social environment imply that people's emotional and rational response to LGBTQ+ advertising messages is shaped by more than their sexual orientation, especially for straight people, their political and cultural background having a massive impact on how they perceive homosexual-

orientated advertisements (Oakenfull et al., 2008). For this reason, a study conducted by Northey et al. (2020) discusses how people's political ideologies represent a key determinant in how they grasp the concept of gender and sexuality in marketing and advertising. The findings show that when products and brands were displayed with homosexual imagery in an advertisement, they were more appealing to liberal respondents than to conservative consumers (Northey et al., 2020). Therefore, in the context of Romania, the likelihood of people who voted for liberal and progressive party affiliations, such as USR (i.e., short for Save Romania Union), is higher to endorse LGBTQ+ advertisements, rather than people who voted for extremist and far-right political parties, such as PSD (Social Democratic Party) or AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians). Additionally, a scientific study conducted by Herek (1988) has illustrated that there is a strong correlation between straight people's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ advertisements and their geographical location. Other studies have also demonstrated that people who reported growing up in smaller towns or rural regions indicated a substantially more negative attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community and therefore, towards LGBTQ+ advertisements, compared to people who reported growing up in urban regions or bigger cities (Casazza et al., 2015). For this reason, although in various parts of Romania, especially rural areas, it remains a country with deep homophobic roots, people being reluctant to LGBTQ+ advertisements, in Bucharest however, the endorsement to homosexual-related imagery and representation in advertising is much greater.

## **2.2. Pride Month**

Originating in the late 1960's as a consequence of the protests and the social activism commemorating the Stonewall Riots in New York City, the concept of "Pride Month" is notoriously acknowledged nowadays as the month where the LGBTQ+ community is widely honoured, being internationally celebrated (Champlin & Li, 2020). The Stonewall Riots were spontaneously initiated in June 1969 by the LGBTQ+ community in response to a pivotal police raid which resulted in violence towards many members of the community occurring at the Stonewall Inn, a predominantly homosexual-friendly bar in New York City (Stein, 2019). Accordingly, this event marked the watershed event which catalysed the pro-LGBTQ+ rights and liberation movement (Champlin & Li, 2020; Stein, 2019).

Consequently, June is significantly marketed as Pride Month, especially in more liberal countries, as a means of honouring the historical cultural shift in the LGBTQ+ rights

movements and memorialising the turning point in the social stigmas, vilification and discrimination faced by the community, supporting equal rights and improving society's attitudes towards it (Awareness Days, 2021). Therefore, during this period, numerous celebratory events and parades are organised, representing a symbol of social and self-affirmation, recognition as well as increased visibility of the people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities (Peterson et al., 2017). For instance, during Pride Month, in metropolises such as Amsterdam or New York City, organisations present a massive level of involvement in advocating the community (Weeda, 2021). Therefore, the LGBTQ+-related posters are being actively exhibited in a large number of major commercial companies as well as restaurants and bars. (Weeda, 2021).

Although Romania's government is far from adopting a more socially and culturally progressive wave, the notion of Pride Month has been increasingly visible in Romania in recent times. Despite numerous COVID-19 restrictions, there have been estimated 8000 participants during the LGBTQ+ march in Bucharest in 2021, and the number of involved people annually increasing (Reuters, 2021). Even more so, there has been vital progress in the marketing and advertising area in Romania regarding promoting homosexual-related imagery or LGBTQ+ symbols. As a consequence, one of the largest retail companies in Romania, respectively H&M, has released in June 2018 “#LoveForAll”, the first Pride clothing collection, which was available in all of their stores across the country, releasing similar collections in the following years as well (Filat, 2018; Murgoci, 2019).

Subsequently, a step further in advocating for the LGBTQ+ community in Romania has also been taken by other retail organisations such as Converse, Pull & Bear as well as IKEA, which has also raised the rainbow flag in front of their stores to mark the celebration of the community as a gesture of notoriety and to promote the LGBTQ+ rights (Crestin Total, 2018; Revista Tango, 2021). Additionally, in 2019, the multinational retail corporation Carrefour has publicly advertised in Romania a family-oriented book which presents to children what it means to be a family in different forms and cultures, homosexual couples being included as well (Editie de Vrancea, 2019). Moreover, that specific book was also disclosing images of a little girl holding hands with two men, along with the text: “My dads take care of me and sometimes they take me to the zoo.” (Editie de Vrancea, 2019).

Therefore, although the presence of the concept of Pride Month from organisations in Romania is not as cultivated as in other Western countries, it does, however, illustrate a progress in the movement regarding showing support towards the LGBTQ+ community.

## **2.3. People's perception towards different types of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising**

### **2.3.1. Lesbian vs. Gay vs. Bisexual vs. Transgender Advertisements**

When consumers are regularly subjected to various value-laden messages, they are projected to inevitably develop inaccurate assumptions and expectations on how a specific individual should behave, due to the exposure of stereotypical portrayals (Chung, 2007). As media representation serves as a means of shaping the society's definition of today's world, the heterocentric ideology of the public misleads them into thinking that being part of the LGBTQ+ community represents a trend (Chung, 2007; Champlin & Li, 2020). Consequently, previous research focuses on the general negative perception of the population of lesbian, gay and transgender people that can reinforce prejudice, leading to the depersonalisation of the people who identify as one of the minorities observed (Chung, 2007).

Prior existing LGBTQ+-related research has explained that the attitudes towards same-sex couples can be correlated with the social protocol regarding the prescribed roles and behaviours in a relationship (Champlin & Li, 2020). Therefore, society has accepted heteronormative portrayal of the roles that men and women have to fulfill, failing to tolerate and recognise other behaviours outside of these norms. Consequently, when it comes to gay men, they are not usually perceived as socially acceptable, due to the stereotypical media representation of gay men as being characterised as more feminine (Chung, 2007; Nölke, 2017). On the other hand, although lesbian women have also suffered from pre-existing preconceptions, they are more likely to be accepted by the society than gay men (Champlin & Li, 2020). The justification lies under the over-sexualisation of women in various media industries, such as advertising, movies, TV shows, pornography and so on (Gill, 2009). For this reason, lesbian women are embodying hemenoic femininity characteristics, usually being represented as hot, high-spirited and flirtatious (Gill, 2009, Champlin & Li, 2020). Additionally, compared to advertisements portraying two men where society instantly deducts that they are a couple without being explicitly mentioned, consumers are more accepting of advertisements where women are portrayed as a consequence of the population's inability to recognise lesbian couples, assuming that they might only be friends (Chung, 2007; Nölke, 2017). However, although in progressive countries, the representation of same-sex couples is not that narrow, portraying gay men and lesbian women both as

being feminine and masculine, in societies with highly established traditional norms, such as Romania, companies are more likely to display images which are more socially acceptable (Champlin & Li, 2020).

It is undeniable that both scholars and companies have placed a larger focus on depicting same sex-couples, respectively lesbian and gay people, still shying away from portraying transgender people or other minorities from the spectrum. Due to the fact transgender people have only started being represented for the first time in advertisements in 2015 in the United States, such advertisements have not started also penetrate the market in less progressive countries such as Romania yet (Nölke, 2017). Not only does the justification also lie mainly under the society's misconception of the social protocols, where men should behave masculine, whereas women should behave feminine, but in religious countries, society will criticise any adherence from the traditionalist rules imposed (Champlin & Li, 2020). Therefore, although the Western societies have started to normalise being transgender, in countries similar to Romania, the society is not prepared to be exposed to such representation whether it is in advertisements or in media. Additionally, similar to transgender people, another part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum which has been previously underrepresented is comprised of bisexual people. While the representation of bisexual people would stir negative reactions due to the sexuality, it would also provoke such reactions as a consequence of the social stigma of promiscuity, which might additionally challenge the importance of commitment in relationships (Nölke, 2017).

### **2.3.2. Explicit vs. Implicit LGBTQ+ Advertisements**

As previously mentioned, the level of involvement from companies in the LGBTQ+ marketing and advertising world is broadly correlated with the normative standards in a society. More than that, how such advertisements are portrayed in a society can be correlated with how accepted the LGBTQ+ community is in the specific culture. Therefore, multiple companies, particularly in Western societies, are currently advertising homosexual-oriented messages, such as advertisements that explicitly endorse same-sex couples; for instance, the commercial aired by Zola, Inc., which features a lesbian couple kissing (Alcorn, 2019; Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Simultaneously, organisations, especially in less progressive societies, are more inclined to display advertisements with a more subtle and implicit representation, but which are still considered a media scheme of showing support, only

portraying LGBTQ+ iconography, such as the rainbow flag (Alcorn, 2019; Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

Prior research explains that heterosexual people might react differently to the two types of LGBTQ+ advertisements specified, respectively implicit and explicit LGBTQ+ advertisements (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). In a study conducted by Eisend and Hermann (2019), it has been found that people are more prone to negatively react to an explicit LGBTQ+ advertisement than to an implicit one. These findings are illustrated by clear evidence that, after Suitsupply launched an advertising campaign portraying two gay men kissing, it has generated a negative emotional response from the general public, as a large number of consumers unfollowed the organisation on multiple media channels (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). For this reason, similarly, when Carrefour Romania issued the book for the little ones illustrating homosexual parents, the explicit LGBTQ+-oriented imagery resulted in a massive backlash from the Romanian people (Editie de Vrancea, 2019; Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Contrariwise, when H&M released in Romania their clothing campaign consisting of t-shirts with the LGBTQ+-related colours as well as the words “Pride”, “Equality” and “Love”, although the major retail company still received a harsh response from the public, their campaign was an absolute success, their products being nearly sold out in less than two weeks (Murgoci, 2019).

On the other hand, compared to heterosexual consumers, LGBTQ+ people are not as accustomed to socio-conventional norms in regards to gender roles or behaviours. Consequently, people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities are prone to be more accepting of any type of advertisements representing the community (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Therefore, Nölke (2017) explains that the lack of diversity regarding LGBTQ+ advertisements are a consequence of the fact that although companies are trying to penetrate the LGBTQ+ market with these advertising campaigns, the general public will react in a certain way nonetheless. Therefore, any message or image whose behaviour and appearance does not comply with the society's rules will remain invisible which questions companies' intentions about whether LGBTQ+ advertisements actually appeal to the community (Nölke, 2017).



## **2.4. The phenomenon of Rainbow Capitalism**

As cultural and social minority groups have become increasingly more accepted by Romanian society, a various number of organisations and advertisers have also started to take part in this movement, portraying a diverse image of the society in their marketing campaigns (McDonald et al., 2020). Organisations have been gradually embracing the notion of “brand activism”, taking a firm stand on various issues, similar to increasing the visibility of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ minorities, such as combating systemic racism, fighting against climate change or other polarising and controversial socio-political issues (Duarte, 2020).

Although McDonald et al. (2020) point out that the justification for organisations to design such advertisements is due to the ethical responsibility that they have, being compelled by their moral compass to change the social norms, this is not universally true for all businesses. Consequently, some companies are not completely genuine when it comes to being a true advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, only using this as a propaganda method by jumping on the bandwagon in order to profit off of the community. For instance, a study conducted by Legum and Zekeria (2021) found out that multiple companies who are known to be massive supporters of the LGBTQ+ community, publicly displaying advertisements online and offline with the community’s symbols, such as CVS Health, AT&T, Deloitte and so on, have also donated to numerous anti-LGBTQ+ politicians. Even more so, the organisations’ support can also be contested when the advertisements are promoted only during one month of the year, respectively during June, this notion being called “rainbow capitalism” (Falco & Gandhi, 2019). The development of such a concept, also addressed under the term of “pink capitalism”, is a result of companies segmenting the market by creating different niche markets, in order to appeal and attract a specific target audience (Peñaloza, 1996). When companies are “pink washing” a social cause, advertisers do not care about positively shaping the image of the LGBTQ+ community in society rather in an attempt to increase their revenue streams, to extend the number of their potential clients and especially for reputational achievements purposes to improve the image of their brand to be perceived as modern, open-minded and progressive.

Simultaneously, this comes with the consequence of offending some people, especially the ones who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities. For this reason, previous research conducted by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explains that for people who are deeply

invested in a specific issue and have given a lot of time and effort into that specific topic, the likelihood of these people to be persuaded through the “central route” is higher. Therefore, these people are more prone to observing the advantages and disadvantages of a subject, using critical and analytical reasoning to reach the most favourable outcome (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). On the other hand, the same research demonstrates that the likelihood of people who are less likely to be invested in an issue to be persuaded through the “peripheral route” is higher as they can be quickly persuaded by superficial features, such as the popularity or the aspect of an issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For this reason, the notoriously known sportswear company, Nike, Inc., caused a stir within the black community after launching a strong advertising campaign with Colin Kaepernick, the American football star who was dropped by the NFL (i.e., the National Football League) after protesting against police brutality of black people in the United States (Duarte, 2020). While Nike, Inc. initially won the praise of the people of colour as well as a large number of white people, the sentiment shifted when the organisation’s financial records had been made public, revealing that only approximately 10% of its executives were black (Duarte, 2020; Schrottenboer & Guynn, 2021). Subsequently, black people were the ones who inevitably had a hostile response and have spoken against the systemic racism and racial injustice present in the United States and against Nike, Inc. and other organisations who capitalise on black culture (Duarte, 2020).

Consequently, similarly by analysing the perception of people in Romania, based on the elaboration likelihood model presented by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), I am assuming that due to their personal involvement, people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ groups might have a negative reaction towards organisations who are promoting these types of advertisements especially during Pride Month because they are more attached to the cause and they are more prone to be knowledgeable of problematic involvements in regards to these organisations. Thus, contrariwise, straight people from Romania are more likely to be indifferent to the reasoning behind the company’s support and not care about the genuineness of the advertisements, only taking part in the support of the community, as a result of their somewhat ignorant outlook regarding LGBTQ+ policies or previous anti-LGBTQ+ controversies. Consequently, by adopting the likelihood elaboration model proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), this research seeks to observe whether Romanian citizens consider that the benefits which might derive from this movement can outweigh the back motives of an organisation to capitalise on the LGBTQ+ community. A similar analysis

can be conducted in order to answer the first sub-question as well, respectively straight and non-straight Romanian people regarding the LGBTQ+ community and the advertisements displaying the community. However, the researcher acknowledges the multiple factors which can contribute to a person's attitudes towards this subject due to the complexity of the matter. Therefore, while the second sub-question can be answered using the elaboration likelihood model presented by Petty and Cacioppo (1996) because the level of implication and acknowledgment of the community is taken into consideration, the first sub-question deals with multiple aspects, such as age, gender, political ideologies and other demographics.

## **2.5. Societal Consequences of Advertising**

Although the effectiveness of advertising is generally positively correlated with the growth of an organisation, it has been widely demonstrated that advertisements, especially those with a social dimension, are also associated with the level of impact that they have on a society (Drumwright, 1996; Kim et al., 2015). Consequently, it is believed that mass media and advertisements can have a major impact on the society's beliefs by encouraging consumers to assess the information and process the message promoted and to eventually be able to relate with their own feelings, thoughts and experiences (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, multiple scholars have established that advertisements have the power to shape a society and essentially, to redefine it (Grau & Zotos, 2016; McDonald et al., 2020).

It has been suggested that society and its advertisements present similar values and ideas, multiple researchers demonstrating that advertisements frequently reflect a real portrayal of the perception of the society and the times that we live in, in order to appeal to the right people (Eisend, 2010; Paulson & O'Guinn; 2017, Pollay, 1986). A study conducted by McDonald et al. (2020) defines this notion as mirroring the society. Consequently, organisations in progressive countries have started to include a more complementary outlook on how our culture is perceived, promoting advertisements which feature people from different races and cultural backgrounds or non-traditional families, illustrating the socio-normative standards imposed by a culture (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). In the attempt of reaching and targeting their audience, advertisements represent a clear image of how a society thinks by making use of images, language and messages that are considered preferable and appealing by the society (McDonald et al., 2020). For example, due to the white monopolisation of the television industry in the 20th century as well as the lack of

various legal human rights of people of colour, one of the first advertisements featuring an African American celebrity was broadcasted in the 1960's only as a result of his growing popularity (McDonald et al., 2020). Additionally, advertisements airing in that period starring people of colour were depicting them as servants, such as the advertising campaign of Shenely's Cream of Kentucky Bourbon in 1940's portraying an African American man as being the one serving the drinks to a white person (Lawson-Borders, 2019). Therefore, it was widely considered at that time abnormal to see people of colour being positively represented in mass media (Lawson-Borders, 2019; McDonald et al., 2020).

Moreover, following a similar trend, although the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals or couples in the advertising world is common nowadays in the United States, it is only by virtue of the advertisers' attempt to remain in correspondence with the reality of the society and its rapid social and market changes (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). For this reason, after the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015, the level of representation of the LGBTQ+ community has massively increased, several advertisements which were doing justice to the minorities involved occurring, including the advertising campaigns of Campbell's Soup, Virgin America, Tiffany's and so on (Castillo, 2015, McDonald et al., 2020). Additionally, Branchik (2007) demonstrated that over time, the positive reflection of the image of LGBTQ+ advertisements in mainstream advertising has only shifted with the improvement in people's attitudinal changes towards the community. Consequently, the presence of LGBTQ+ friendly advertisements is much more predominant in progressive countries, respectively in countries that have legalised same-sex marriage, such as the United States and the Netherlands, rather than in Eastern European countries, such as Romania, where radical-right social stigmas are adopted. However, despite the anti-LGBTQ+ legal laws in Romania, as the acceptance of the individuals who identify as one of the sexual minorities is demonstrated to be rapidly growing within the socio-cultural dimension, the exposure to such advertisements has also seen a rise in the Romanian mass media culture, consequently mirroring the society's values.

Contrariwise, by appealing to the majority groups in order for them to be exposed to underrepresented groups, advertisements will allow the customer to understand the struggles of these marginalised groups. For this reason, McDonald et al. (2020) suggests that if exposure to LGBTQ+ advertisements grows, consequently, the support from the general population might also increase, defining this concept as moulding the society.. More than

that, Åkestam et al. (2017) explain that, although some people are controlled by their views on the LGBTQ+ community, the media representation of queer couples or individuals in advertisements might positively influence people's perspectives of various controversial topics by engaging with a consumer's compassion and social connectedness. A study conducted by Sheehan (2013) explains that with the raised number of such advertisements, people will become more comfortable with and aware of the presence of LGBTQ+ minorities in society.

While previous research has not been found on how LGBTQ+ advertisements have influenced society over time, this has been studied for advertisements portraying other minorities. These studies illustrated that the more minorities were included, the better the population's attitudes became. Hence, I expect to observe similar patterns in regards to the LGBTQ+ community. A study conducted by Mastro and Stern in 2003 determined that by airing advertisements on the United States television portraying people of colour in a diverse, respectful and human-like manner, organisations do influence the way African Americans are perceived by society by breaking racial stereotypes. For example after Lever Brothers launched a commercial in the 1960's featuring two African American boys while playing baseball, it has been found that although the US's sports industry was dominated by white people, people of colour have begun to become more accepted by their sports fellows (McDonald et al., 2020). As a consequence, the level of representation of African American people has started to simultaneously grow (McDonald et al., 2020).

Moreover, as the Feminist movement began in the 1960s, the representation of gender roles and respectively, the representation of women has also started to shift (McDonald et al. 2020). Campaigns such as "Cause I am a Woman" from Enjoli Perfume's at the end of the 1970s, Nike's advertising campaign in order to empower the women in the sports field "If you let me play", or Dove's slogan "Real Beauty", which empowered women, were airing on several billboards in the United States (McDonald et al. 2020). As such advertisements were starting to gain popularity amongst the general US population, numerous changes have been revealed in a manner in which a woman's role in a society has been transformed (McDonald et al., 2020). Consequently, it is undeniable that in both cases, in the United States, the demolition of racial biases as well as the transformation of the standards of gender roles over the years, have been widely impacted by the exposure to an unconventional perspective constructed by broadcasting various nonconforming images and

messages. Therefore, this has clearly generated a positive influence in the progressiveness of the socio-cultural climate change in the United States, constructively shaping the attitudes and beliefs of numerous Americans. Furthermore, by following a similar trend in a socially conservative Romania, the raised awareness of the LGBTQ+ community, this might lead to a change in the society's values and, therefore, in people's perceptions. Additionally, in the future it might also result in the reconstruction of various government legislations, such as the abolition of the concept of traditional family in Romania and the legal recognition of the civil partnership between same-sex couples.

It is undeniable that the marketing and advertising sector has largely impacted people's attitudes, perspectives and behaviours towards the acceptance of racial, ethnical and sexual minorities as well as the perception of society towards the standards of gender roles, but has also been impacted by the historical transformations in the socio-cultural climate change. Therefore, in this study, by adopting the concepts proposed by McDonald et al. (2020), respectively the mirroring and the moulding model, I am expecting that both straight and non-straight Romanian people to perceive the importance of the LGBTQ+ advertisements as a means of imposing a change in the society, rather than reflecting the progressiveness of a country.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter addresses the research design and discusses all the choices and decisions made when conducting this study in order to observe Romanian citizens' attitudes towards LGBTQ+ advertisements during the community's month of celebration. Firstly, the sampling criteria alongside the extensive overview of the sample data collected will be described. Subsequently, the operationalisation of the concepts presented in the research question and sub-questions will be discussed followed by the justification of the research method chosen for thematic analysis.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

As this research's central theme focuses on examining the patterns of Romanian society in regards to their perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements during the community's month of celebration, in-depth interviews method was employed mainly due to its extensive characterisation of the concepts explored (Babbie, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative research method was adopted due to the possibility to gain detailed and comprehensive information in regards to a person's attitudes and thoughts, the researcher wishing to intensively explore the concepts analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, by conducting a series of 12 interviews, the researcher will be able to thoroughly ask the participant specific questions which would require a broad answer, while also being able to ask additional questions based on their answer (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the thematic analysis of qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to properly interpret and evaluate the respondent's perspective on the subject matter to a more comprehensive extent and to accurately concentrate on analysing similar ideas within data (Boeije, 2010). This research method was selected due to the researcher's possibility to seek repeated patterns of meaning and thoughts in the data collected. The findings of the analysis adopting this type of research approach emphasised the underlying attitudes and concerns of heterosexual, homosexual and transgender people towards LGBTQ+ advertisements (Kuckartz, 2014).

Moreover, by using this qualitative research method, the participants will have the possibility to openly elaborate their points of view, as well as to properly develop their feelings and opinions. This thematic analysis research method focused on observing central themes within the data which can correlate to the wide topic of the consequences of society's

implications in the advertising industry. Due to the complexity of the research question, which could not have been answered through any form of quantitative research, the interview method has been chosen to conduct this analysis as a result of the feasibility of using open ended questions. For this reason, this gave respondents the privilege of having as much freedom as needed to communicate their feelings and perceptions by freely explaining their thoughts. Additionally, using in-depth interviews also allowed the researcher to create a comfortable and an appropriate setting to ask the participants about how they believe that people's social backgrounds can influence their position on the subject. Therefore, adopting this method granted the researcher the opportunity to examine the relation between their perspectives towards this topic and the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community from the political agenda, analysing how can LGBTQ+-related advertisements improve the image of the community in the society.

### **3.2. Sampling and data collection**

To accurately observe the attitudes predominantly existent towards the advertising of the LGBTQ+ community during Pride Month of the citizens of a country where traditionalist norms are imposed, 12 interviews were conducted, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The sampling method chosen to determine the suitable participants was a non-probability one, respectively purposive sampling. This method has been selected due to Babbie (2014)'s findings which explain that through this method, the researcher has the possibility to determine the participants based on relying on their own judgement. Although this sampling method was prone to have a considerable bias due to the existence of the volunteer bias, this strategy has been chosen due to the opportunity to determine whether the participant fits the criteria required.

Considering that selected participants presented similar characteristics, such as age, nationality and other demographics, this can represent an implication of the sampling method chosen, repressively purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). Therefore, the homogeneity of participants might influence the results due to their similarity. Consequently, young people living in Romania were selected to participate in the data collection, aged between 20 and 26 years old. However, in order to ensure maximal variation, participants' sexual orientation varied, respectively 6 members identified as straight, whereas the other 6 identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community, in order to closely observe the difference between how LGBTQ+ advertisements are perceived by people who are unquestionably



involved in the community and by people who are only supporters. This information was established by asking the participants before conducting the interview and by publicly and officially asking the participants during the interview once again. Even more so, geographical regions, respectively urban or rural areas were additionally taken into consideration when making the selection. Although this did not represent a critical part of the analysis, due to the fact that this was not the main comparison of the study, it was, however, added to the guide as a result of previous findings which were focused on this criteria as well. Therefore, it was only analysed if the data displayed a clear discrepancy between Romanian's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month based on their cultural and political background present in the geographical area. Table 3. reveals an overview of the participants who agreed to take part of the study alongside with the given pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexual orientation</b>	<b>Region</b>
Maria	24	Female	Straight	Urban
Violeta	22	Female	Straight	Rural
Alexandra	25	Female	Straight	Urban
Andrei	26	Male	Straight	Rural
Bianca	23	Female	Straight	Urban
Iulia	22	Female	Straight	Urban
Andrada	23	Female	Lesbian	Urban
Catalina	24	Female	Bisexual	Rural
Matei	25	Male	Gay	Rural
Gabriela	26	Female	Bisexual	Urban
Flavius	24	Male	Gay	Rural
Lavinia	20	Non-Binary	Queer	Urban

Table 3.1.

Since not every participant was particularly familiar with many LGBTQ+ advertisements which have been portrayed in Romania during Pride Month, various stimuli were utilised in the interview. All participants who are part of the LGBTQ+ community

were able to name some of the most known and less known advertising campaigns where the community was represented. Although the majority of participants who identified as straight was familiar with some LGBTQ+ advertisements, there were also some participants who have not recalled encountering such advertisements before. Thus, to make these participants acquainted with homosexual-related advertisements in Romania, two advertisements were shown to them, which are presented in Figure 3.1 and 3.2. These images represent the most well-known advertisements in Romania where the LGBTQ+ community is being represented. After showing them these advertisements, participants were able to easily recognise previously seeing both of them.



Figure 3.1 – example of H&M's advertisement for their Pride collection



Figure 3.2 – example of Ikea advertising their support for the LGBTQ+ community during Pride Month

Prior to starting to conduct the interviews, an interview guide, found in Appendix A, which included core questions was developed alongside the stimulus materials in order to gain a deeper understanding of Romanian citizens' thoughts on the three main themes of the study. Therefore, the interview consisted of six parts which were structured to answer the three sub-questions and the overarching research question. The first part was made up of icebreakers, where both the interviewee and the interviewer answered a few questions about themselves to familiarise themselves with each other. The second part included questions regarding the current climate in Romania in regards to the LGBTQ+ community to analyse how the community is perceived by the Romanian society. The third part consisted of an analysis of how the Pride Month movement is seen in Romania to determine whether its presence is seen and accepted in the society. The fourth part incorporated questions regarding how Romanian society reacts to advertising the LGBTQ+ people in Pride Month and how people respond to distinctive advertisements of the community. The fifth part focused on Romanian participants' attitudes regarding the companies' involvement in the movement to determine whether the LGBTQ+ community benefits from it. And lastly, the sixth part consisted of questions in regards to the influence that LGBTQ+ advertising has on society to observe whether participants believe whether this can positively impact the progressiveness of Romanian society. For this reason, the second, third and fourth part of the interview was used to answer the first sub-question, the fifth part was used to answer the second sub-question, whereas the sixth part was used to answer the third sub-question. However, while the most fundamental questions were inevitably asked, during the interview there were always emerging new questions, followed by new discussions as well.

Due to my location outside Romania, respectively the Netherlands, the interviews were conducted via Zoom between May 11th and May 20th, 2022. These were recorded alongside with participants' approval. As the interview was conducted online, participants were offered the possibility to choose between turning on or off their cameras, in conformity with their comfort. Fortunately, as every participant decided to have their camera on, it led to an easier process by experiencing face-to-face contact. Additionally, to inform participants of their rights during and after the interview, the informed consent to be signed was sent to the participants a day prior to the interview, being also reminded of them during

the interview. The participants were made aware in the informed consent that the interviews will be audio recorded, but are exclusively used for research purposes and will be deleted immediately after the transcripts are completed. Additionally, participants were also informed that the answers are stored anonymously and any name of people, place or other personal information will be coded to keep confidentiality and to not have reputational or social risks. Interviewees also understood that it is purely voluntary and they are able to stop the recording at any time or refuse to answer any question they are not comfortable with, while also acknowledging that there is no monetary compensation. Furthermore, as Romanian is the participants' native language, half of the interviews were held in Romanian at their preference in order to create a more comfortable setting and in order for them to freely and easily express their thoughts and ideas. Consequently, the interviews which were held in Romanian have been summarised in one paragraph in English, all quotes being presented in English, translating the necessary quotes used for the results section from Romanian to English. Additionally, when quoting from the interviews held in English, when slur words were used, it was replaced with "[slur]" to respect the community.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

The chosen qualitative method for this study on straight and non-straight Romanians' perceptions of LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month is thematic analysis. The interviews were chosen to be analysed using this qualitative method due to its useful and accessible approach to identify key repetitive patterns, only limited previous theoretical knowledge being necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis method was selected for this research due to the possibility to characterise and define the data collected in a great depth from the codes that emerged from the dataset, which were classified in overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, in the study conducted by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is described as the means of identifying, analysing as well as interpreting significant patterns, allowing the researcher to consequently seek through the data obtained, fundamental and meaningful patterns.

As thematic analysis represents a standardised manner of conducting a research, Braun and Clarke (2006) have established various steps to properly and successfully adapt such method in the data analysis. In the first step, the familiarisation with the dataset is essential, representing data immersion. This initial step has been achieved by looking for various companies who have previously promoted on social media, billboards, television and

so on the LGBTQ+ rights in previous years in Romania during Pride Month. Moreover, after conducting the interviews, the development of the initial codes represents the second step, resulting in 145 initial codes. The dataset was analysed and interpreted using the online qualitative analysis tool called Atlas.ti, which helps the researcher by choosing the most relevant information in the interview, automatically assigning them to individual codes. A number of three main themes and seven sub-themes emerged from the Romanian participants' discussions about how the society perceives LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month and the potential impact that it might have on the society and on the community. Furthermore, after grouping all the codes together, it is vital at this point to concentrate on the similarity of the codes and to create underlying themes from them. Therefore, the themes which emerged from the codes are related to Romanians' perceptions of different types of LGBTQ+ advertisements, companies' involvement in promoting LGBTQ+ rights during Pride Month and the possible outcomes within a society from advertising such images and messages, simultaneously representing the sub-questions. Lastly, a thematic map is developed, which can be found in Appendix B, using the sub-codes and the themes established based on the dataset.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents and explains the results that have been observed from the thematic analysis which has been previously conducted to answer the overarching research question of this study. Simultaneously, since it is common in qualitative research, the observations which emerged from the results of the research will be immediately linked with the literature, comprising the discussion part of the study. However, the researcher decided to include the strengths and implications of the study in the final chapter to create a clearer and a more accessible method of analysis. Therefore, after interpreting the results of the analysis, Romanian society's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month will be determined. Additionally, the results that emerged from the analysis will be thoroughly examined and connected with the sub-research questions proposed. For this reason, this research will explore how Romanian society perceives various types of LGBTQ+ advertisements, how the involvement of companies in this movement is grasped by Romanian society and their thoughts on how these types of advertisements can instil change in the society. Therefore, the three underlying themes that derived from the thematic analysis were: *perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements*, *perception of companies involvement* and *society's impact of LGBTQ+ advertisements*.

The first theme, respectively *perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements*, which were interpreted from the analysis conducted, describes Romanian citizens' perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, correlating them with their perception of advertisements in which LGBTQ+ people are represented. Therefore, the explored sub-themes are analysing the society's judgement and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community, internalised homophobia, presenting harmful stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community and the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ symbols as advertisements.

The second theme, *Perception of companies involvement*, explores how Romanian straight and non-straight people perceive the genuineness of the companies when advertising the LGBTQ+ community during Pride Month, the month where the community is celebrated. Consequently, this theme is linked with the second sub-question of this thesis and tackles sub-themes such as using the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing strategy, and therefore as an advertising campaign, as well as the need for companies to take responsibility in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, in order to

answer the second sub-question, the need for constant involvement from the companies in promoting the LGBTQ+ community, not only during Pride Month were analysed.

The third theme which emerged from the thematic analysis conducted relates to *The impact of LGBTQ+ advertisements on Romanian society*, which examines how such representation can influence a country with traditional and illiberal ideologies, such as Romania. In order to answer the third sub-question, the need for exposure to LGBTQ+ advertisements in a close-minded society based on the reflection of the reality of Romanian culture and how such advertisements can contribute to the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Romania were analysed.

Table 4.1. The themes and sub-themes which emerged from the thematic analysis

Themes	Sub-themes
Perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements	Judgement and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community Internalised Homophobia Harmful stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community The acceptance of the LGBTQ+ symbols as advertisements
Perception of companies' involvement	The use of the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing strategy The need for companies to take responsibility in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community The need for a constant involvement from the companies in promoting the LGBTQ+ community
The impact of LGBTQ+ advertisements on Romanian society	The need for exposure to LGBTQ+ advertisements in a closed-minded society Contribution in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Romania

#### 4.1. Perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements

This section of the chapter seeks to answer the first sub-question proposed, which examines the Romanian society's perception of LGBTQ+ advertisements in general and during Pride Month. Consequently, various patterns that have been recognised during the 12

interviews related to how society perceives the LGBTQ+ advertisements will be analysed. The patterns included are the Romanian society's judgement and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community and what influenced this prejudice as well as the internalised homophobia that the LGBTQ+ people faced due to the society's exclusion of the community. Additionally, it will also be discussed how society sexualises the LGBTQ+ community based on wrongful stereotypes and the reasons why the society is more prone to be accepting of the LGBTQ+ symbols as advertisements.

#### *4.1.1. Judgement and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community*

This section will focus on how participants consider that the straight Romanian society reacts to the LGBTQ+ community as well as advertisements in which the community is represented. While most participants perceive the straight Romanian citizens as being more open to liberal ideologies than in previous years or decades, all participants recognise the huge need for progress, believing that there is a long way until the LGBTQ+ community feels completely safe in Romania. Additionally, when asked to describe how the LGBTQ+ community is seen in Romania, Matei explained that even in today's world, people from this spectrum are seen as "freaks", while Violeta mentioned that the Romanian society correlates homosexuality with a "mental disease" or something punishable.

As Romania decriminalised homosexuality only in the previous decade, respectively in 2001, all participants have acknowledged the generational gap between the youth and the elderly (Margarit, 2019). Consequently, all participants explained that the second and third generation of straight adults have been previously the ones who were more prone to be less accepting of the LGBTQ+ community and simultaneously of the advertisements in which LGBTQ+ people are portrayed publicly. Most participants associated this hostility towards the community with the influence that communism had on Romanian society. Therefore, Andrada stated: "So let's keep in mind the fact that they most likely lived during the Communist era, they couldn't easily read whatever you wanted...". For this reason, the restriction to information played an immense role in the progressive trend towards the LGBTQ+ community, Ahmad and Bhugra (2010) previously confirming that homophobia is predominantly found in people who are not exposed to this topic. Additionally, it has been identified that people who have grown up with heteronormative ideologies established during communism, Bianca explaining that people who are over 40 years old still have the



mindset that was set in previous decades, for instance “as a woman, you have to marry a man at a young age, have his child and take care of the household”. Consequently, due to the internalisation of the society’s traditional norms, the older generation is predominantly found to be against any progressive beliefs.

Although demographic considerations are vital when analysing an individual’s perceptions, it is also crucial to consider that Romania is a country ruled by religion and the Orthodox Church, which motivates the reason why a large number of people in the society reject the LGBTQ+ community (Margarit, 2019). Consequently, all participants have addressed the strong presence that the Church has on Romanian society, an abundance of people acting based on what the Bible says and identifying themselves with the traditional Christian family. More than that, the political party AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) has recently started to gain popularity and support amongst people who encourage traditionalist and religious beliefs, being predicted to become the most powerful political party in the next election (Mihăescu, 2022). All participants understand that this represents a threat to the LGBTQ+ community due to the far-right laws that they have already proposed. For this reason, Andrada stated: “Everyone was confused and they just came in and were like masks are bad, if you don't want 5G, don't get vaccinated... But, you know, it's really, it's really dangerous... So as you see them talking, so I don't know, talking so easily about a global pandemic that killed so many, you can only imagine what the impact would be if they choose to tackle, you know, a conversation of queerness and what it means...”.

While the older generation of straight people is still struggling to accept the LGBTQ+ community in the society, the younger generation is increasingly becoming more supportive of the community, accepting any means of representation in Romanian society (ACCEPT Romania; 2021a). Most participants have addressed the tremendous impact that mass media had on the youth’s education regarding the LGBTQ+ community. While some participants have described the importance of education as a whole, participants have stated that people are more likely to recognise and tolerate the LGBTQ+ community after realising that those people are functional members of the society. Therefore, Violeta explained that “having higher education still is not going to change in your mind into better. But if you are more educated on the community, yes, I think it would make a difference because if you would understand what this is all about, what it actually is, because it's not a mental disease,

you know, I think they would be more understandable...”. Additionally, participants have also correlated the younger generation’s accepting behaviour with the Western influence that they have been feeding with. Rich et al. (2021) have also discovered the impact of the Occidental societies in regards to the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community after conducting research in South Korea. Consequently, both straight and non-straight participants had a similar outlook regarding how the straight Romanian society perceives the LGBTQ+ community.

#### 4.1.2. *Internalised Homophobia*

Due to the judgement and rejection that the LGBTQ+ community is currently still facing in conservative countries, such as Romania, individuals who identify as one of the minorities of the spectrum grow up in an environment where homosexuality is considered abnormal (Mansergh et al., 2014). Even more so, although most participants were against the heteronormative ideologies imposed by the society, a general negative perception towards the LGBTQ+ community can be justified because of the internalisation of social norms. Since these paradigms are severely impregnated into a person’s belief system, all participants who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, explained their initial internal defensive battle was a result of the negative portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community which perpetuated their attitudes as being unacceptable. Consequently, Lavinia stated that “I literally became depressed when I realised that I’m different from the others and knowing that, you know, I will, will probably have to leave the country if I wanted to, you know, live my life with my partner without being called a [slur] or other types of slurs...”.

Moreover, as this stigmatisation continues to harm the LGBTQ+ community and the Pride Month movement due to the lack of representation and education on this matter, not only do straight people have an inaccurate image of how the community is, but this has also penetrated the community. As Meyer (2003) demonstrated, LGBTQ+ individuals who are struggling with their sexuality may attempt to hide themselves and from the community in order to protect themselves from rejection, harm or shame, a notion that occurs more predominantly in cultures similar to Romania, where the acceptance of the community is reduced. Consequently, some participants who identify as of the LGBTQ+ minorities explicitly stated that they do not identify with the Pride Month movement, nor the community in itself. For this reason, Flavius described his experience as a gay man in

Romania as “horrible” both from the society and the community, explaining that his values do not completely align with the ones of the community.

Although not all LGBTQ+ participants expressed a similar feeling, all of them revealed that Social Media has played an important role in their journey of self-acceptance due to their ability to feel seen. However, even when most LGBTQ+ participants were “coming-out”, the level of information available regarding homosexuality and queerness was not as extensive as it is nowadays (Amaya & González, 2019). Andrada acknowledged that: “Nowadays, you can do this more freely. Not necessarily in Romania per se, but on the Internet as a whole I would like to say... Now this is all friendly now and it's just like I've, I've noticed in children nowadays, they see that more freely like you know I'm free... But nowadays, given the media, Tiktok, Instagram, it's as easy as touching your screen, and you're like I'm fruity so what about it? I mean, my grandparents may not accept me, but I'm fruity so...”. Therefore, when asked if the “coming-out” experience would have been easier if it was done nowadays, Gabriela stated: “If I were to do it right now with the access to the information probably would have been faster and I would have felt less weird about it...”. Participants have also correlated the openness to the LGBTQ+ community with the increased positive representation regarding the community through TV shows, movies as well as any types of advertisements.

#### *4.1.3. Harmful stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community*

While the representation in mass media allowed for the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, this has also fed the predefined stereotypes regarding how the society perceives the community, especially in advertisements. Therefore, although a great portion of the Romanian society is expected to react negatively to advertisements in which LGBTQ+ people are portrayed, the reactions differ depending on the sexual minority displayed.

Although participants were not completely familiar with advertisements in which men and women who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum as well as transgender people are depicted, there was a clear discrepancy in how they perceive society to react to all of them. The results emerged from this comparison showed that participants believe that advertisements in which same-sex couples consisting of two women are viewed more positively than the other sexual groups. While advertisements portraying two women are accepted to a greater extent, Logan (1996) mentioned that this comes as a consequence of

the sexualisation of the two women, satisfying the sexual needs of heterosexual men. For this reason, Alexandra stated that “people react so much better to lesbian women because they are seen as a fantasy of men, you know, and they are fetishised by porn movies...”. Additionally, Matei specified that this double standard only applies when the two women are “beautiful, graceful and feminine”. Likewise, it was illustrated that once women who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum are portrayed in a realistic manner, Herek (2000) suggests that the fear and judgement responses increase.

Regardless of the Romanian society’s deteriorated attitude regarding advertisements authentically portraying LGBTQ+ women, the stigmatised perception of men who are part of the community is considered by participants considerably worse. While all participants were not resentful towards advertisements portraying LGBTQ+ men, they have, however, acknowledged that the society traditionally views men as “dominant”, as well as “big, tall beings that penetrate women to make children”. In a study conducted by Davies (2004) correlated the negative reactions towards men who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum with the ideas rooted in the general belief system, representing the gender roles that have been enforced in previous decades and centuries and following traditionalist rules. Consequently, when men are not portrayed as such, Gabriela and Andrada explained that society believes that “this is disgusting”.

Simultaneously, although there are people within the Romanian society who acknowledge the presence of advertisements representing men and women who are part of the LGBTQ+, the participants were of the opinion that Romania is not ready to display transgender people as well. This reluctance towards transgender people motivates why there has not been published any advertisement portraying them as well. Although companies have not yet penetrated this part of the spectrum, Andrada observed “a step forward” in Romanian society due to the appearance and acceptance of advertisements displaying feminine men. However, it is undeniable that the problematic generational gap occurs in this situation as well. While participants noticed the increased tolerance of the younger generation towards all advertisements explicitly depicting the LGBTQ+ community, they have also explained that the older generation generally refuses to be exposed to these types of advertisements, respectively the ones where feminine men or masculine women, and especially where transgender people are represented.

#### *4.1.4. The acceptance of the LGBTQ+ symbols as advertisements*

As the Romanian society is still perceived to be reluctant to advertisements in which same-sex couples or transgender people are displayed, all participants recognise the need for any form of exposure to the LGBTQ+ community in order to normalise its presence in the society. Therefore, since promoting explicit LGBTQ+ advertisements would create a greater backlash towards the community due to the Romanian society's unwillingness to fully accept the community yet, participants explained that it is vital to start slowly. For this reason, it was suggested to begin with advertising the LGBTQ+ symbols, such as the rainbow flag or the community's colours. Consequently, Catalina stated that "So maybe the implicit could be something that they should work on so that, you know, then gradually you you, you make it more graphic, you know...". Similarly, Gabriela also mentioned that "I think now we are the step in which we first have to insert the things more in an implicit way and then go fully graphic about it...". Additionally, Violeta has also mentioned that these subtle messages appeal more to the Romanian population as a consequence of the society's notion of "I accept them as long as I don't see them...". By depicting implicit images, such as the promotion of the LGBTQ+ flag, participants mention that this can start a conversation, whether it is on social media, at home or even in larger places, such as schools. Therefore, the interviewees believe that once companies start including more and more representation of the LGBTQ+ people, it can lead to the normalisation of the community, even if it something as small as the rainbow flag.

However, despite the fact that the LGBTQ+ community's symbols can be considered more socially acceptable, participants have acknowledged that the society might start detaching the meaning of the rainbow flag. Although Violeta has a positive attitude towards the society, believing that the majority of the people are aware of the significance of the rainbow flag, the other participants did not express a similar view. Catalina mentioned that "they just pass by, and they don't get it...", most participants being of the opinion that the majority of the population, especially the older generation, does not make a connection between the flag and the LGBTQ+ community.

Consequently, although Romanian society might have a more positive outlook in regards to less explicit images with LGBTQ+ people, they have to confront the idea that the world is evolving, and so does the perception towards social minorities, such as the

LGBTQ+ community. More than that, participants who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum emphasised on the importance of an authentic representation in which LGBTQ+ people are portrayed as normal people in order to abolish the society's belief system in which queerness is perceived as abnormal. Therefore, Andrada described how a realistic representation of the LGBTQ+ community is essential in the growing progressive trend that is ought to occur in Romania, stating that:

You know, I feel like it is maybe time for them to see past that, you know, so this is our symbol, but this is what we actually represent, you know, because it's not only in your face, those people are not always in drag makeup or being poor. They're just people like you that just pass by your street every day. You have to be aware of that because they think of queerness in media as they're like extravaganza, really high heels short hair for women and maybe like men, but this is not the case. It's really not the case. And I feel like if we were just to see past the Rainbow and everything, they would not be afraid anymore, you know?

#### **4.2. Perception of the companies' involvement**

The next section of this chapter attempts to answer the second sub-question, which analyses the matter in which straight and non-straight people in Romania feel about a company's involvement in the Pride Month movement. As a consequence, numerous patterns will be examined based on how the Romanian participants perceive organisations' genuineness regarding the prosperity of the LGBTQ+ community. The patterns included are the use of the LGBTQ+ community and its symbols as a marketing strategy and an advertising campaign and the need for companies to take responsibility in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community, including the difference in the perceptions of straight and non-straight people in this matter. Even more so, an additional pattern consists of the acknowledgment of the need for a companies' involvement in promoting the LGBTQ+ community all year and not only during Pride Month to bring awareness to this matter.

##### *4.2.1. The use of the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing strategy*

It is undeniable that as the representation of the LGBTQ+ people increasingly grows, the exposure of society to the community simultaneously raises as well. While the organisations are appreciated for their involvement in the Pride Month movement, all

participants question their genuineness regarding the support shown to the community, believing that it is just part of the culture of capitalism. Therefore, it is perceived that although it may bring awareness and recognition to the LGBTQ+ individuals, businesses exploit the community by its symbols as a marketing and advertising strategy. Although no participant denies the possibility of some organisations to be true advocates for the community, all of them are of the opinion that all companies have the monetary aspect as the primary reason behind their actions, whether this represents gaining profit or improving their image of the brand. Maks-Solomon and Drewry (2020) illustrated that while a large number of corporations understood their social responsibility within the society, those companies tend to jump on the bandwagon, perceiving the advertising of the community during Pride Month as an annual trend. For this reason, Iulia admitted that she has a pessimistic outlook regarding the businesses' implication in the support for the LGBTQ+ community explaining that "I'm going to say that there are more companies who just want to make money out of it than the ones who actually care...". However, Catalina pointed out that despite their monetary motives and following the trend, "it means that they might have some principles that align to it". Therefore, Andrei mentioned that "But they need to be aware that the majority of the community is in the closet so I don't think that they are going to rush in to buy your rainbow t-shirt or socks. Because if their parents know what that rainbow truly means...". For this reason, Nölke (2017) has a similar outlook, explaining that although organisations seek to penetrate the LGBTQ+ market, due to their concern of alienating the mass population, raises questions whether the promoted advertisements are truly in favour to benefit the community.

Most straight people were of the opinion that an organisation's genuineness regarding their support for the community does influence the society's purchasing intentions when buying a product or service which was promoted using LGBTQ+ people or symbols. Violeta stated that "Well, you shouldn't be purchasing that sneaker if they know that they are anti and they're, you know, releasing a line of sneakers with pride motives on it that you just shouldn't buy that sneaker...". However, Matei, Catalina and Lavinia, who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, have a contrasting attitude, Matei stating that "it's not like people are going to stop buying from Ikea if they are in fact lying about their support. It might create a backlash, but once a new promotion is up, they're gonna be next in line...". Catalina also acknowledges that the human mind is not made to retain that much information, respectively knowing whether those companies are truthful about their support or not. Additionally,

Lavinia was also of the opinion that regardless of a company's motives, "exposure is still exposure", believing that any representation of the LGBTQ+ people within the media will benefit the community. However, Andrada makes a vital distinction, believing that the people within the LGBTQ+ community "would stop buying it". Additionally, she also recognises that this represents a "risky move" to adopt such strategies in a country such as Romania where people from the LGBTQ+ spectrum are not yet acknowledged and accepted within the society. Therefore, participants have indicated that whenever they were looking at comments from the posts related to the LGBTQ+ community published on Social Media from large corporations, there were always negative responses, attacking the community. Flavius considers that irrespective of the backlash received whether it is from the society or the community in itself, "the management is not interested in this, because they are sure that this is a momentary thing".

#### *4.2.2. The need for companies to take responsibility in the representation of the LGBTQ+ community*

Despite the fact that there have been conflicting opinions whether companies are capitalising or not on the LGBTQ+ community, using the representation of the community as a means of making profit or improving their brand image, some participants were able to see past a company's motives for the community's benefit. Marketing experts have illustrated that as the media represents the most powerful tool that any company can possess nowadays, organisations need to understand their role in the society and the power over it (Cheng et al., 2022). Therefore, transforming a product or displaying people from a minority in response to bring awareness to the cause represents the initial and the most essential action needed to be adopted (Cheng et al., 2022). It was found to be common for the organisations to embrace the representation of the people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum without truly helping the community afterwards or even being against the whole movement (Legum & Zekeria, 2021). For this reason, three participants who identified as straight, Violeta, Maria and Andrei, truly believe that if companies are not genuine supporters of the community, they should not promote the LGBTQ+ community at all. Consequently, Maria mentioned that: "I don't think those benefits are more important because it will start a whole war between the company and the LGBTQ+ community, which will put the community in a bad light for being aggressive or even threatening...".



Contrary, the rest of the participants revealed that although companies might have monetary motives when advertising the LGBTQ+ community, they acknowledge the possible advantages that may occur from that representation. For this reason, despite the company's intentions, the exposure to the LGBTQ+ community will help the normalisation of the community, ultimately believing that this will bring more good than harm to the community. Therefore, Gabriela stated: "Like I would rather have people bombarded by companies, even those that are anti the LGBTQ community. And then they see that even they are doing it. So they're like, Oh, maybe it's like we should normalise it. So maybe yes, I guess.". Additionally, Andrada pointed out that "I would put the benefit of the community above their scammy motives...". However, although Catalina would rather see those advertisements where she feels seen and appreciated, she explained that "you know that they're not supportive and it hurts, you know, they're lying to us...".

Unexpectedly, the results which emerged from analysing the interviews are different from the initial predictions based on the elaboration likelihood model developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). While it was expected from the people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum to have a negative outlook in regards to the companies' genuineness due to their personal involvement, straight people were the ones predicted to have an indifferent attitude. However, it is clear that LGBTQ+ participants presented a more positive reaction towards organisations who are promoting such advertisements during Pride Month due to the benefits acknowledged. Nevertheless, the researcher believes that because of their personal involvement in the cause, LGBTQ+ participants would rather live in a society where the community is being represented despite an organisation's intentions, compared to straight participants who only took into consideration the company's moral compass.

#### *4.2.3. The need for constant involvement from the companies in promoting the LGBTQ+ community*

It is undeniable that all participants recognise the importance of Pride Month in a society as well as the positive influence of organisations when advertising the LGBTQ+ community during its month of celebration. Catalina even stated that: "For example, I'm bisexual... So Pride Month is like a birthday to me. Like it's like a birthday to me because I feel so special that month." However, all participants, especially the ones who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities, emphasised on the need of LGBTQ+ representation from

these companies all year round. Therefore, Lavinia's reason for this statement was due to the fact that "I am queer all year, not only during June", while Andrada explained that "You don't have to have a specific, specific month for this...".

As the advertisement which was promoted during Valentine's Day with two women kissing who are relatively important figures in Romania was broadly a subject of discussion during the interviews, participants mentioned that they would like organisations to take a similar initiative, promoting the LGBTQ+ in other circumstances rather than Pride Month as well. Therefore, Andrada suggested that businesses should express their support during Christmas for instance, in order for people to be able to easily identify with the images and messages promoted to illustrate the Romanian society that they are not abnormal. Consequently, she stated that: "I think the key thing is for them to be able to see us humans, as having natural relationships and be like, you know, living together, domestic life, arguing even, you know. That organic sense of life that everyone, even them, as you know, normative can identify with, you know... But I would really love to see it being normalised, in a cutesy way, in a romantic way even, and not to cross the the barrier to the sexualization...".

Moreover, not only did participants express their feelings about how organisations should promote the LGBTQ+ community outside of Pride Month, they have also suggested that the people who are part of the spectrum should be portrayed in a positive manner. A research conducted by Cheng et al. (2022) demonstrated that the exposure of the LGBTQ+ community in a positive attitude led to a higher acceptance towards the community within the society. Flavius emphasised the idea of depicting the story of a successful people that Romanians admire, illustrating only at the end his sexuality. He highlights that Romanian people will realise that LGBTQ+ people are not "only about flashy, high heels and men in dresses", hoping to break specific stereotypes and judgement regarding the community.

#### **4.3. The impact of LGBTQ+ advertisements on society**

The last section of this chapter explores what kind of influence that advertising the LGBTQ+ community can have on a country with a deeply rooted traditionalist mindset, such as Romania. Consequently, three primary patterns will be examined based on how the participants from Romania believe that advertisements in which the LGBTQ+ community can positively or negatively impact their society. The patterns included are the need for

exposure of the LGBTQ+ community in a closed-minded society based on the reflection of the reality of Romanian culture and whether they believe that such representation can contribute to the acceptance of the community in their culture.

#### *4.3.1. The need for exposure to the LGBTQ+ advertisements in a closed-minded society*

Certainly, compared to other Western societies, who are known to be more progressive in regards to the LGBTQ+ community, the level of representation within media is still relatively reduced in various parts of the world, including Romania. All interviewees correlate this issue with the Romanian society's traditionalist norms, which emerged both due to the society being ruled by the Orthodox Church, but also from the illiberal reforms enforced during the communist era. Consequently, participants believe that this motivates the low number of LGBTQ+ advertisements in Romania, Alexandra stating that "I truly believe that there would be so much more advertisements and not only advertisements, but also more representation in media or in our society as a whole...". Additionally, it is also perceived that if Romanian society was more open and supportive to such diverse messages and images, there would be more advertisements in which people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum are explicitly represented. Therefore, participants believe that same-sex couples and transgender people would be much more advertised on social media, on billboards and other platforms, if acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ within the Romanian culture was higher. As a consequence, Alexandra described that "the advertisements would clearly be more explicit, and not only in showing, I don't know, showing two men kissing or holding hands, but there would also be available explanations for the understanding of all, especially children, and would not only put the flag up and that's it...".

Due to the scarce media representation, Cheng et al. (2022) illustrated that it is critical for companies to continue being involved in the Pride Month movement despite the possible backlash that the organisation might receive afterwards. Participants agreed that the people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum are often underrepresented or even misrepresented in the Romanian mainstream media. Andrada even stated that: "They think there's like ten of us, maybe. And also, as we talked about with Alina Ceauseanu and Cristina Ich, if they see them kissing and being, you know, glamorous and sexual, they think that this is all the community is about, as being of kink or an orgy, like, you're having an orgy...". Therefore, she is of the opinion that not only is the LGBTQ+ community still not

acknowledged and recognised by Romanian society, but they are also not taking the entire movement seriously. Consequently, Lavinia revealed that in order for society to break this general belief's system based on stereotypes and hatred, companies should portray a more accurate image of how the LGBTQ+ community is. If the LGBTQ+ community was accurately represented within the media, Gabriela explained that "It starts a point of conversation, you know... But this doesn't mean that some people might change their ideas, you know, their ideas and their perceptions".

However, Stonewall's Faith and Belief Network (2019) mentioned that the journey to the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in a society does not count only on positive representation within the media, but people ought to be educated on this topic to truly accept the community. This perception has most participants as well, Andrada revealing that Romanian society would be more open-minded towards the community once people understand that being part of the LGBTQ+ is not a mental disorder. Even more so, participants also pointed out that the older generation already does not understand how the mass media industry operates, if companies include images and messages that people are taught to be against from the beginning, will only aggravate the situation. Therefore, Violeta stated that:

Yes, but with explanation. If I mean, if someone sees it that, you know, it's there. If my grandpa sees an advertisement, you know, it's, he's just going to say, Oh my God, that is so nasty. And he's just not going to care, you know? Or you would just walk by it because you wouldn't care because you wouldn't know the reason behind it, you know. So besides exposure, you should be a lot of information, a lot of correct information.

#### *4.3.2. Contribution in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Romania*

While all the Romanian participants showed utmost support for the LGBTQ+ community, it was previously demonstrated that this does not imply that the general population has a positive outlook towards the community as well. Furthermore, when asked to make a comparison between the situation regarding the LGBTQ+ community in the Western societies and in Romania, participants acknowledged that undeniable, the Occidental cultures adopted a more radical attitude in regards to the community. For this

reason, they motivated this progressive trend of their liberal perspectives as a result of the presence of the media representation of LGBTQ+ people. Consequently, all participants were of the opinion that following a similar trend to the Western countries, the more representation within the media exists, the more accepting people from the Romanian culture will become towards the LGBTQ+ community as well. However, due to the fact that the majority of Romanians still perceive the LGBTQ+ community in a negative light, Gabriela suggested that “We have to start progressively. So first with implicit content and then progressively, like progressively try to shift to a more explicit one... It would render Romanian society way more accepting because it will get people thinking and discussing and maybe changing their own opinion.”. Additionally, Bianca also stated that “this is a great start to get to the point where the general society would be able to watch a three-hours movie about a gay couple, for example”.

Although Romania has a long way until it reaches the moment where its citizens would accept a large number of LGBTQ+ advertisements, participants explained that with the help of these advertisements, the community would become normalised within the society. For this reason, Iulia stated: “If you're open minded and you're accepting, you wouldn't notice it at something standing out. You would see it as normality.” Similar to what Iulia explained, participants emphasised on the idea that any type of positive and accurate media representation will lead to the Romanian society to stop perceiving people as abnormal or “weird”, as Flavius mentioned, for having a different sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, Andrada mentioned that: “But I think that really seeing them on TV, seeing them on the internet, seeing them on a little ad on the obscure sites you are visiting and all that, can really help that, can indeed make a change... So I think that the more we talk about it and the more it is seen in the right way, not in the glamorous, wow way, the more people will try to accept that there are people like this among them, and there's no need to humiliate, bully or whatnot.” Consequently, the Romanian participants believe that if Romania starts promoting the LGBTQ+ community to bring awareness, recognition and acceptance, in the future, they are optimistic that LGBTQ+ people will not need to be promoted as “something different”, as Lavinia referred, due to the fact that they are seen as a normal part of the society.

## 5. Conclusions

This research has sought to observe and analyse the attitudes of Romanian people in regards to advertisements representing the LGBTQ+ community during its month of celebration, respectively Pride Month. Moreover, a comparison has been conducted between the perception of straight people and people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum from Romania. In the attempt to answer this study's research question of "*What is the attitude of straight and non-straight people from Romania towards LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month?*", 12 interviews and a thematic analysis has been conducted. The observed sub-research questions studied how people perceive the LGBTQ+ advertisements within Romanian society, the perception regarding the involvement of the organisations in the Pride Month movement and the societal impact the such advertisements can have in Romania. In order to answer the overarching research question and its accompanying sub-questions, the results emerged from the analysis based on the interviews with Romanian straight and non-straight participants. Consequently, the thematic analysis was constructed with the help of the coding program called ATLAS.ti.

### 5.1. Major Findings

Before conducting the analysis, despite the study conducted by ACCEPT Romania (2021a) which demonstrated that the acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community in Romania has exceedingly risen, it was predicted to find for the first sub-question that the majority of the Romanian society is thought to have a negative perception in regards to the LGBTQ+ community. This comes as a consequence of the illiberal and traditionalist mindset instilled as a consequence of the country being ruled by the Orthodox Church and the reforms which emerged from the communism era (Margarit, 2019). For this reason, it is believed that the majority of the people within Romanian culture seek to protect the Eastern European country from any progressive norms developed in the Western European countries (Margarit, 2019; Voiculescu & Groza, 2021). Participants had a similar outlook, explaining that the citizens from the country they grew up in perceive the LGBTQ+ community as an "abnormality", believing that the people within the community "do not deserve any legal rights". Therefore, regardless of the increased level of acceptance in the last decade towards the LGBTQ+ people, there is still a tremendous amount of hatred and judgement towards the community from the general society, which can harm the people involved. Consequently, although all participants had a positive attitude towards advertisements in which the

LGBTQ+ community is represented, it was however acknowledged that the majority of the Romanian society is reluctant to accept such representation in media.

While a contrasting expectation was anticipated based on previous literature in regards to the results of the second sub-question, this, however, represented the only major difference in the belief system of straight and non-straight participants. Although for the other parts of the interview all participants had a similar outlook on the subject matter, it was the first time where personal involvement in the movement had an effect. As previously mentioned, although it was expected based on the elaboration likelihood model conducted by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) for the LGBTQ+ participants to have a negative perception towards the companies' involvement, they have, however, presented a positive one, putting the benefits of the community above the company's back motives. On the other hand, straight people were expected to have a positive attitude towards companies perpetuating the LGBTQ+ community, the straight participants' responses being completely distinctive. This comes as a result of the different thoughts, experiences and feelings that people from each category of sexual orientation have experienced. Therefore, it is no surprise that participants who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum understand the constructive implications of promoting such advertisements.

Moreover, as the society presents such conservative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, based on the study conducted by McDonald et al. (2020), it was also predicted to discover for the third sub-question that the participants are of the opinion that the presence of representation within media has the possibility to change the perspectives of a society's population. While all the Romanian interviewees had a similar view regarding this, they also specified that media representation is not enough for them to see a massive improvement within their culture in regards to the opinions related to the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, the participants explained that the society will only reach the point where the LGBTQ+ community is normalised, not only by bringing awareness through advertisements, TV shows, movies and so on, but also educating the society on this topic. However, it is presented in the studies in which Western countries are analysed that the raised level of progressiveness in regards to LGBTQ+ rights is correlated to the increased acknowledgement and acceptance of the community, which derives from media representation only (Cunningham & Melton, 2014; Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

Taking everything into consideration, after making a comparison between the theoretical framework which emerged from previous literature with the results analysed, it can be concluded that Romanian participants acknowledged the importance of promoting LGBTQ+ advertisements during Pride Month in a conservative country, such as Romania. Even more so, they emphasised that it is vital to implement such representation of the LGBTQ+ community to break harmful stereotypes that Romanian society has. Although there was not much difference between the perspectives of straight and non-straight participants from Romania, they all recognised that once the exposure of the LGBTQ+ community increases, Romanian society will be able to adapt liberal ideologies, following a similar progressive trend as in the Western societies.

## **5.2. Limitations and future research**

The main limitation that occurred when conducting this research is related to the generalisation of Romanian society, which is based purely on the participants' assumptions. Since the first part of the analysis is constructed around how participants perceive that the society sees the LGBTQ+ community and any means of representation. While there might be some truth in their answers, it is vital to understand that their perception is subjective and thus, does not represent the reality that we live in. However, in order to have a more realistic outcome, this study should be conducted not only using a larger data set, but it should also be conducted using both a quantitative and a qualitative method of research. Therefore, future researchers will have a more precise and detailed understanding of how Romanian society actually perceives the LGBTQ+ community and advertisements promoting the community.

Furthermore, another limitation can also be considered the fact that all participants had a positive attitude towards people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, meaning that it has only been analysed one side of Romanian society. Consequently, the researcher believes that if the data sample was also formed of people who are against the community, not only would they perceive the involvement of the organisations differently, but they might also be of the opinion that promoting LGBTQ+ advertisements is redundant. Additionally, the results might not be completely reliable as a result of the limited diversity regarding demographics, the data predominantly consisting of only young people, the majority of them living in major cities of Romania, or even Bucharest, its capital. Thus, similarly to what was previously said, to accurately observe straight and non-straight



Romanian people's attitudes, the data set should be more diverse, including people who live in rural areas, people from different generations and even people with a lower level of education.

Similarly, because of the straight participants' interpersonal contact with people who identify as one of the LGBTQ+ minorities, another limitation is the fact that there was not a clear difference in the belief system of the participants in the two groups, respectively straight and non-straight people. Undeniably, there have been some discrepancies in the perception of companies' involvement in the Pride Month movement due to LGBTQ+ participants' personal involvement in the matter. Additionally, people who are part of the community have been also recognised as being more involved in the community and more knowledgeable in regards to it. However, no other significant difference in their mindset was found.

### **5.3. Strengths of the research**

Unfortunately, as of June 2022, instead of advancing on the progressive scale, the Romanian government harshly tries to adopt anti-LGBTQ+ legislations, which can harm the community even more (Tobias, 2022). Not only does the government want to deny young people's right to access to information about sexual orientation and gender identity, by prohibiting the use of such materials in school, but they also want to place homosexuality and sex change in the same category as raping, sexual assault and so on (Tobias, 2022). For this reason, the researcher believes that the most important strength of the research lies under the assumption that by bringing awareness of the matter, respectively by talking about it, can lead to more people recognising the alarming situation in Romania. Therefore, by familiarising other people with the circumstances in Romania and other countries in the Eastern European block, such as Hungary and Poland, can make people take a stand in such matters in order to reduce the injustice.

As such legislations are expected to be put in practice, this only sets the Romanian society a decade back in regards to fundamental human rights. However, although the government wants to adopt such illiberal laws, the society does not abide by the decisions proposed, multiple protests taking place, especially through social media, from people who are part of the community and not only. It is believed that this backlash came from people who were previously exposed to diverse ideologies in which LGBTQ+ people are not portrayed negatively, through media (Tobias, 2022). Additionally, based on previous

literature, Peñaloza (1996) explained that media representation has represented for a long time a clear and accessible method of getting the message through the consumers.

Simultaneously, the results of this analysis show that the people who are prone to be more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community are the ones who understood that the people who are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum are just as normal as they are. This is believed to be achieved through an extensive exposure to LGBTQ+ people, respectively through TV shows, movies and especially through advertisements. While it was acknowledged that not only such representation is needed to change the society's perception, it does represent a first step in the process of becoming more accepting as a society, leading to the minimisation of the discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community.

As it has been previously specified, this study has tried to fill in a research gap in regards to the promotion of LGBTQ+ advertisements in an Eastern European country, where illiberal and conservative political ideologies are still imposed (Margarit, 2019).

Consequently, since prior literature has focused exclusively on Western European countries or other progressive societies, where the level of acceptance is undeniably higher, this research project was able to analyse whether media representation through advertisements indeed has a noticeable influence on a society (Cunningham & Melton, 2014; Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Therefore, after a critical analysis, it has been determined that although, both in a Western and an Eastern society, regardless of how progressive a country is, it is indisputable that LGBTQ+ advertisements are able to trigger heterosexual consumers, creating backlashes (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Margarit, 2019). However, the distinct difference between the two categories of societies is represented by how the respective society reacts to it in mass. In Occidental societies people are more likely to oppose the negative reactions the respective LGBTQ+ advertisement has received, even creating a whole movement to combat the hatred received, a mindset which was obtained through extensive media representation (Eisend & Herman, 2019). On the other hand, in countries where LGBTQ+ rights are still rarely recognised, such as Romania, not only is the backlash greater, but people are also more likely to be reluctant to take any action against such negative reactions (Voiculescu, 2021). However, the analysis of this research project has determined that although there is still a long time until Romania reaches a similar point as other Western societies, through advertisements and other media representation, the Romanian society can follow a similar progressive trend, having the opportunity to become in the future one of the most liberal country in the Eastern European block.



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## **7. Appendices**

### **Appendix A - Interview Guide**

#### **Icebreakers**

1. Do you think you can start with a short introduction about yourself where you can tell me your name, pronouns, age, whether you are a student or are you already working as well? What are you most passionate about?
2. I know it's not something that it's frequently asked, especially in an interview, but what is the sexual orientation that you identify with?

Now that we have gotten to know each other a bit, let's talk about the current state of Romanian society's attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community.

#### **Current Climate in Romania**

3. Can you describe in your opinion Romanian society's current situation regarding LGBTQ+ rights?
4. Can you describe in your opinion how society's attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community have changed in the last couple of years or decades?
5. How do you think the current political state has influenced the LGBTQ+ community? Have you seen progress in our current government?
6. Do you think society has become more open? How?

#### **Pride Month**

Now that we have established how the LGBTQ+ community is perceived in Romania, I would like to talk about the Pride Month movement.

7. Do you know what Pride Month is?
  - a. Give basic explanation if necessary
8. Can you describe what it means to you?
9. How do you perceive the whole movement? As good/bad, necessary/unnecessary? And why?
10. Have you noticed the presence of Pride Month within the media in Romania? How? Where?

### **Advertising of the LGBTQ+ community in Pride Month**

11. (if not mentioned in the previous question) Have you seen in Romania the LGBTQ+ community represented during Pride Month in advertisements as well?
12. Have you seen a change in advertisements during Pride Month over the years?
13. Do you think that the number of LGBTQ+-related advertisements has increased over the years?
14. Do you think you can give some examples?
15. And can you describe those advertisements?
16. Have seen ads illustrating same-sex couples?
  - a. Can you describe how the ads illustrating same-sex couples were presented?
  - b. Do you feel uncomfortable seeing gay men displayed on advertisements?
  - c. What about lesbian women?
  - d. Or trans people?
  - e. Do you think society reacts differently to all these? How?
17. And have also you seen advertisements only showing the LGBTQ+ symbols?
18. What do you think of each of these types of advertisements?
19. Which one do you think appeals more to society?
20. And which one has more impact on society?

### **Rainbow Capitalism**

Now that we have talked about how society reacts to LGBTQ+ advertisements, I would like to talk about the companies' involvement in the movement.

21. How do you feel when companies are engaged in this type of advertising?
  - a. Do you think that they really care about the community?
22. How do you feel about companies who are supportive only one month of the year, respectively during Pride Month?
23. And how do you feel about companies who promote LGBTQ+-related products/services but they are actually anti?

24. Do you think this aspect, that those companies are anti-LGBTQ+ rights, have an influence on the purchasing intentions when buying a LGBTQ+-related product/service?
  - a. (if not mentioned) ask if they personally would buy it
25. Do you think promoting such advertisements has any benefits regardless of the company's motives?
26. Do you think these benefits outweigh the motives?

### **Influence on society**

Lastly, I would like to discuss how this movement can influence, positively or negatively, the Romanian society.

27. Can this movement contribute to the acceptance of inclusion of LGBTQ+ community? How?
28. Do you think that these advertisements reflect how society is? Why?
29. Do you think that the LGBTQ+ community is represented in advertisements only based on what the society thinks of the community in itself? Why?
30. How do you think advertisements would change if the Romanian citizens were more open-minded?
31. How do you think people can become more open minded regarding LGBTQ+ people?
32. Do you think that even though there are Romanian citizens who are close-minded, the exposure to these types of advertisements can instil change? How?
33. We all know that the Western societies are more open-minded than Romania, do you think that advertisements had any impact on the progressiveness of the Western societies?
34. Do you think that the more LGBTQ+ advertisements are, the more accepting the society gets?



## Appendix B - Thematic Map

Figure 1. - Themes emerging from interviews to answer the first sub-question:

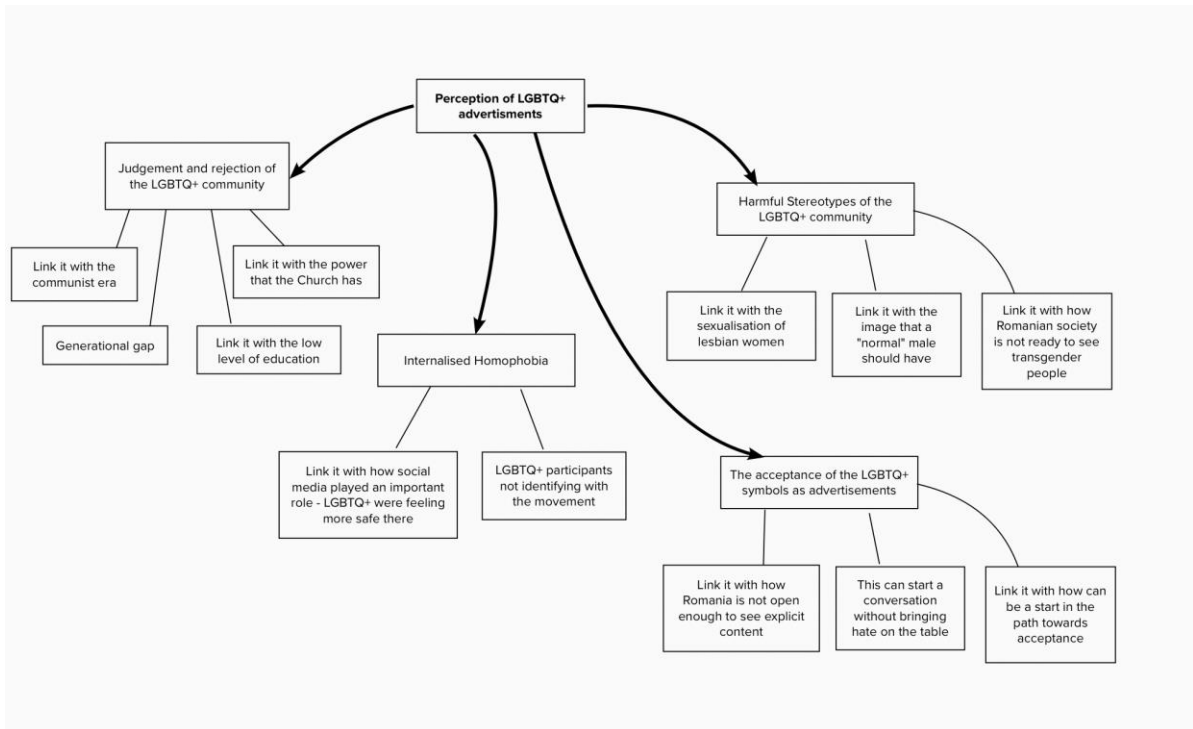


Figure 2. - Themes emerging from interviews to answer the second sub-question:

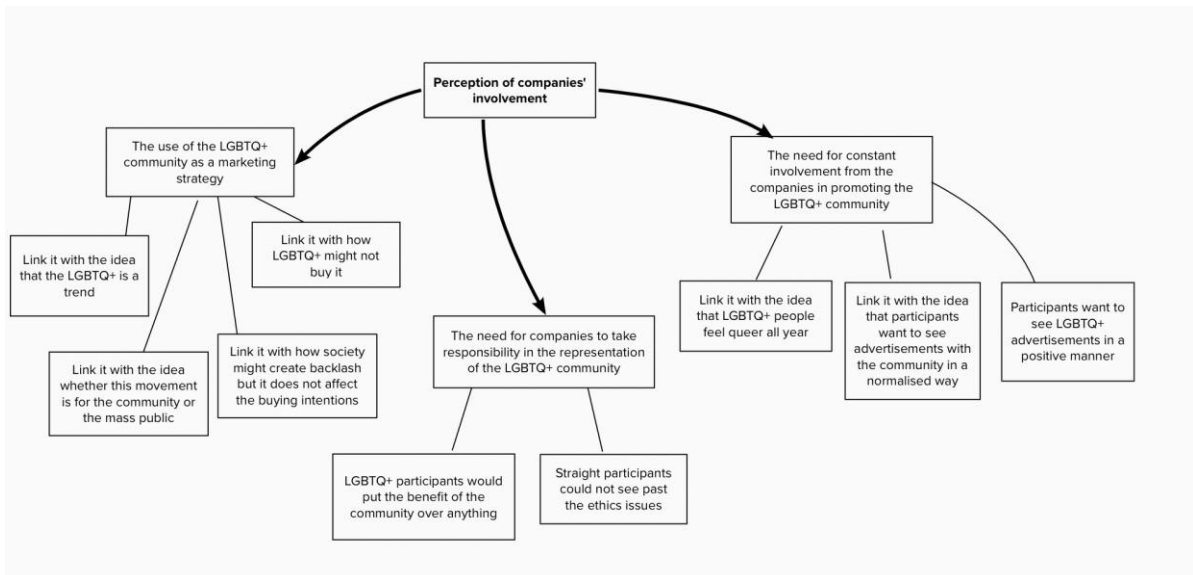


Figure 3. - Themes emerging from interviews to answer the third sub-question:

