

**Pride and Perception: How the Inclusion of LGBTQ Themes in Advertising Influences
Consumer Perception.**

A Quantitative Study of Consumer Behaviour in the Context of Queer Advertising.

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ABSTRACT

Diverse representation, and the inclusion of LGBTQ themes has been increasingly prominent in modern marketing campaigns. Although such practices are valuable, and can advance inclusivity in mass communication, many consumers have mixed attitudes toward brands that incorporate queer references. This can often influence their ad attitudes, or trigger rainbow-washing perception. The latter is said to most typically occur in campaigns released specifically for Pride Month. To better understand which types of queer ads evoke different brand attitudes, and which other factors can contribute to forming consumer perception, this study investigated the following research question: *To what extent does the level of inclusion of LGBTQ themes in advertising impact consumer's attitude toward the brand, considering the mediating roles of rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward the ad, and the moderating role of LGBTQ involvement among Dutch Gen Z residents?*

This study was guided by the theory of indirect persuasion, CSR, corporate hypocrisy, and the ELM theory. A quantitative online experiment was conducted, in which the participants were exposed to three types of ads, with different degrees of explicitness of queer themes (an explicit queer ad, an implicit queer ad, and a heterosexual ad with no such themes). After being shown the stimulus, their brand and ad attitudes were measured, along with their rainbow-washing perception, and LGBTQ involvement.

The findings evidence that the level of queer explicitness affects the consumers' attitude toward brand, and that both implicit and explicit queer ads are favoured over those that do not include diverse representation. Moreover, it was discovered that both rainbow-washing perception and one's ad attitude serially mediate one's brand attitude. LGBTQ involvement was not reported to have a moderating effect on rainbow-washing perception; however, the explicit ad was evidenced to evoke rainbow-washing the most prominently. The results of this study uncovered interesting insights into how consumers react to brands partaking in queer advertising, which possess both societal and practical value.

KEYWORDS: *queer advertising, attitude toward brand, attitude toward ad, consumer perception, rainbow-washing*

Table of Contents

Abstract and keywords.....	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theoretical Framework.....	5
2.1. Queer iconicity in advertising	5
2.2. Explicitness vs. implicitness of queer imagery	6
2.3. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).....	8
2.4. Attitude toward ad & attitude toward brand.....	10
2.5. Rainbow-washing in queer advertising	11
2.6. LGBTQ involvement as a moderator	12
3. Method	16
3.1. Research design.....	16
3.2. Stimuli	17
3.3. Sampling procedure.....	18
3.4. Research procedure	19
3.5. Sample	20
3.6. Measurements and reliability	21
3.6.1. Attitude toward brand (<i>Ab</i>).....	21
3.6.2. Attitude toward Ad (<i>Aad</i>).....	23
3.6.3. Rainbow-washing.	25
3.6.4. LGBTQ involvement.	27
3.7. Validity	28
3.8. Data analysis.....	29
3.9. Manipulation checks.....	30
4. Findings.....	33
4.1. The effect of type of ad on attitude toward brand	33
4.2. The mediating effect of rainbow-washing and attitude toward ad on attitude toward brand.....	34
4.3. The moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement on rainbow-washing perception	36
5. Conclusion and discussion.....	39
5.1. Summary of findings	39
5.2. Discussion	39
5.3. Limitations and suggestions for further research	44
5.4. Practical implications	45
References.....	46
Appendix A. Stimulus	51

Appendix B. Questionnaire	54
Appendix C. ChatGPT prompts for generating the ads.....	68
Appendix D. Declaration of AI use	69

1. Introduction

Striving for inclusivity has been increasingly foregrounded in modern communication, specifically in Western countries (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1433). This trend has been particularly notable among modern advertisers, who progressively lean towards advocating for equality, and discussing societal issues (Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 160). An example of this can be seen in ads expressing solidarity with “the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community” (Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 160). In fact, the support towards the LGBTQ has become so apparent in marketing that it led to the emergence of a distinct category of campaigns – *Queervvertising*, which stands for advertising that incorporates queer characters or references (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023, p. 3). The references can vary and may include many kinds of themes and visuals, although most universally they involve rainbow flags, and references to Pride and Pride Month (Balirano, 2020, p. 52). Scholars examining queervvertising have outlined a plethora of its positive outcomes (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023, p. 17). For example, they found that it can enhance inclusive representation in mass communication, and can contribute to opposing intolerance (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 564-565). More specifically, it can facilitate greater visibility and promote advocacy for the LGBTQ community on a large scale (Balirano, 2020, p. 56). This is a highly sought after effect, since, despite the increased support, queer members are still struggling with discrimination and homophobia on a global scale (Ventriglio et al., 2021, p. 1).

Although its potential is promising, expressing queer advocacy in advertising is receiving mixed responses (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405). While some consumers view the diverse representation as positive and socially significant, others perceive it as fake, or even misleading (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83). Research shows that many members of the LGBTQ community negatively view such campaigns, particularly those that are released during Pride Month (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). This time of the year is when most brands participate in queer advertising and decide to display their support to the community (Rusch, 2023, p. 1). This support typically occurs by companies temporarily adding queer references, mainly rainbows, to their ads, products, or logos (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Such examples of queer advertising have received significant attention, as they can be perceived in multifarious ways (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405). Specifically, because many brands are accused of rainbow-washing their campaigns (Rice, 2022, p. 291). This term signifies including queer representation in a dishonest and exploitative manner, that is aimed entirely at increasing profits of the brands,

instead of genuine allyship (Rice, 2022, p. 291). Such hypocrisy and ingenuine claims of advocacy critically undermine the consumers' trust in these brands (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405).

To better understand consumer perception of queervvertising, and what contributes to the formation of brand attitudes, this study sought the answer to the following research question: *To what extent does the level of inclusion of LGBTQ themes in advertising impact consumer's attitude toward the brand, considering the mediating roles of rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward the ad, and the moderating role of LGBTQ involvement among Dutch Gen Z residents?*

Scholars already recognised the potential of this topic and conducted many studies to advance the understanding of consumers' responses toward queer advertising (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 400; Cheah et al., 2021, p. 1231; Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1433; Rusch, 2023, p. 10). However, most of the existing literature generalised queer advertising and did not distinct its different formats, and only few opted for some extent of differentiation (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 423). As mentioned before, queervvertising and the utilisation of LGBTQ themes can be very extensive. Omitting to acknowledge it, by not distinctly classifying the researched advertisements can lead to limited understanding of the results. For this reason, this study considers three types of ads, based on the explicitness of the inclusion of queer themes. One ad, resembling a Pride Month campaign incorporates plenty of explicit LGBTQ visuals, one implicit queer ad, which features a homosexual couple, but no other references to the community, and one heterosexual ad, with no queer themes whatsoever.

Furthermore, the majority of the existing literature focused on examining direct effects of queer advertising on consumer ad (Um, 2014, p. 822), brand (Um, 2016, p. 463), or rainbow-washing perceptions (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441). No research has simultaneously investigated the complexity of consumer attitudes toward queer advertising, including the various direct, indirect, mediating, and moderating effects on brand attitudes. This study aimed to fill in this research gap, by combining the different factors that were considered by scholars in the past and examines them jointly. Firstly, guided by theory of indirect persuasion (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17), and Corporate Social Responsibility theory (CSR) (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6; Kotiloglu, 2023, p. 378), it comparatively examined how the explicitness of queer themes in different ads affects attitudes toward the advertised brand. Secondly, this research applied the corporate hypocrisy theory (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83) to the rainbow-washing phenomenon (Rice, 2022, p. 291), and examined the academically recognised, causal relationship between one's attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand (MacKenzie

& Lutz, 1989, p. 48, 52). In other words, it investigated rainbow-washing and ad attitudes as a serial mediation. In addition, it also considered how the consumer's individual characteristics, namely their LGBTQ involvement moderated their rainbow-washing perception. The involvement regarded the participants' approach to the queer community, and to what extent they are concerned about its equality (Wulf et al., 2022, Appendix A, p. 2). The well-renowned Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) guided this part of the research (p. 11).

Moreover, the existing studies devoted to queer advertising focused mainly on examining the American, and German population (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1439; Johns et al., 2022, p. 9), and no research was found about consumers living in the Netherlands. This country is a strong advocate for queer rights and is the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage (Crary & Corder, 2021, para 1). Despite this, there is a lack of studies exploring how its population reacts to LGBTQ images and advertising. For this reason, the researcher opted for Dutch residents as the investigated sample, as it may offer interesting insights, and contribute to the gap within the academia. Particularly, the members of Gen Z were focused on, as they are a generation that highly values and strives for inclusivity and diverse representation (de Witte, 2022, para 7).

This study establishes its relevance for many fields. For the academia, it offers in-depth insights into consumer research and queer advertising. By utilising the existing knowledge, and the renowned advertising theories, this study can determine whether the same principles are applicable to queer advertising. It also fills in the previously acknowledged research gap within queer advertising studies that do not distinct its categories, and predominantly focus only on only its direct effects on consumer attitudes. The examined topic also has notable societal relevance. It can raise awareness about LGBTQ visibility, and can contribute to enhancing the representation of this minority. It can also provide information on which type of representation of the community is favoured among the Gen Z population. By doing so, it can guide future communication specialists to ensure this type of representation is followed and implemented. Lastly, the findings can also be valuable for advertisers. It can help them obtain information about their audiences, and consumer preferences. Consequently, advertisers can better understand how to create effective campaigns using queer advertising, advocate for the community, and how to avoid rainbow-washing backlash, thus expanding the market reach of their brands.

The following chapters introduce the theoretical frameworks underpinning this research, and the chosen methodological approach. A quantitative online experiment was conducted, to

investigate the consumer perception of Gen Z Dutch residents, who were exposed to advertising with a varying degree of queer themes' explicitness.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Queer iconicity in advertising

Members of social minorities value iconicity for a number of reasons. Mostly, because icons can carry profound emotional, and sentimental meaning, and can display one's pride of belonging to a particular group (Wiltgren, 2014, p. 8, 12). Balirano (2020) defines icons as "cultural artefacts" which are easily recognised by a large group of individuals (p. 49). They hold special significance, as they represent "a concept or an idea", and they play an important role in shaping a shared cultural identity (p. 49). Bearing this in mind, it is unsurprising that the LGBTQ community, an example of a social minority, similarly has a collection of icons affiliated to it, which are highly valued by its members (p. 52). Indeed, scholars reported that the spectrum of queer iconicity can be very extensive, and tends to include e.g. objects, places or events, and symbols (p. 52). Objects can be exemplified by particular articles of clothing, or even film props (p. 52). The most notable of queer events is the Pride Parade (p. 52). The event takes place in June, which is often called the Pride Month, in recognition of the history of Stonewall parade riots (p. 52). Last, but not least, symbols involve a pink triangle, and most widely known and referred to – the rainbow flag (Balirano, 2020, p. 52).

The consideration of queer symbols is valuable for many reasons. Fundamentally, they can elevate the visibility of the LGBTQ community (Balirano, 2020, p. 56). They contribute to acknowledging and enhancing the presence of the minority, as well as present a bonding opportunity for its members (p. 56). Queers attach great importance to such symbols, as they largely contribute to strengthening the community's sense of togetherness (Balirano, 2020, p. 51). As mentioned before, the most substantial of all queer icons, is the rainbow symbol (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 557). Scholars are aware of its relevance and have devoted their research to exploring the rainbow effect further (p. 554). Their findings show that queer people experience largely positive emotions when encountering such symbolism (p. 564). The presence of rainbow icons can increase their self-worth, comfort, and their motivation to be more invested in showcasing such iconicity themselves (p. 564). Although this study investigated specifically the reactions of queer participants, the researchers also emphasise the importance of non-LGBTQ members and spaces using queer symbols (p. 565). In such cases, the symbols can then also be perceived as signs of support, safety, and a testament of allyship (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 565).

The aforementioned research clearly evidences how positive the impact of iconicity can be, and how it can contribute to much-valued, diverse representation (Wolowic et al., 2016, p.

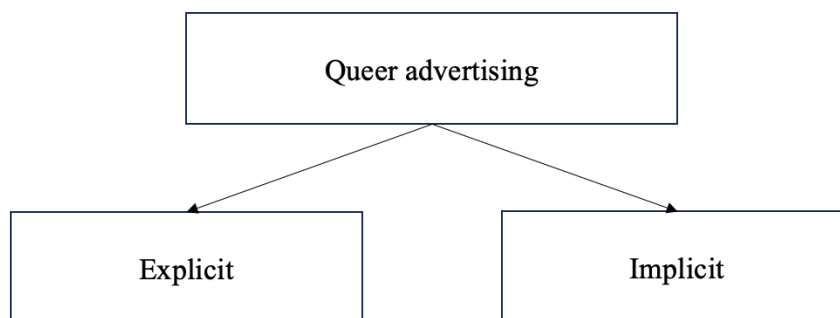
564-565). In fact, striving for diversity and queer inclusion has greatly expanded in recent years, and has even become integrated in advertising (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1433). Even so, the support towards the LGBTQ community has become so apparent in marketing that it led to the emergence of a distinct category – *Queervertising* (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023, p. 3). This newly coined term involves “the use of a broader and more inclusive imagery” in brand communication (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023, p. 3). This imagery can take on many forms, however most universally, it involves adding rainbow colours to a brand’s logo or advertised product (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Such use of queer icons in advertising, and displaying signs of allyship and advocacy to the community is most apparent during Pride Month (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Nonetheless, the incorporation of LGBTQ references in marketing can vary substantially (Balirano, 2020, p. 52). To be able to examine in its implications in more detail, researchers identified an approach of categorising queer visuals in advertising based on its explicitness, which is explained further in the following section (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 428).

2.2. Explicitness vs. implicitness of queer imagery

Just as the queer themes and their use can vary substantially, so does the way they are depicted. Most common distinction identified in literature relates to how visibly they are incorporated (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 428). The themes can either be presented in a more overt, or covert manner, which scholars referred to as implicit or explicit LGBTQ-related imagery (p. 423). This division is presented in figure 1. In addition to their varying degree of visibility, the two types of queer iconicity also differ in how easily they are recognised as associated with the minority (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 423). The explicit visuals are very clearly affiliated with the LGBTQ for both the queer and non-queer audiences (p. 423). They are easily identifiable, and their meaning relating to the LGBTQ is clear for all kinds of audiences (p. 423). Implicit icons on the other hand, tend to be a lot more subtle, and are often only recognisable by the members of the community (p. 427). The queer meaning behind such symbols can easily be lost on the heterosexuals who are not accustomed with their cultural significance (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 427).

Figure 1

Division of queer advertising based on Oakenfull and Grenlee (2005).



In addition to identifying the grouping of queer advertising, scholars also investigated the potential difference in consumers' reactions after being exposed to each type of ads (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 432; Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). Specifically, they explored how the explicitness of LGBTQ visuals in advertising can elicit diverse attitudes toward the advertised brand (Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). They discovered that brands using implicit queer ads are perceived a lot more positively than those with explicit images (Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). The reason behind this can be attributed to the impact of *indirect persuasion* (Um, 2016, p. 463).

Indirect persuasion relates to advertisers predominantly incorporating visual or verbal elements that are suggestive rather than straightforward in their meaning (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 7). The popularity of using indirect and implicit claims and/or visuals is increasing due to a plethora of advantages stemming from it (p. 7). According to this theory, consumers are more likely to react positively to ads which rely on subtle methods of persuasion, and figurative premises (p. 17). This is predominantly because such ads allow interpretive flexibility that does not constraint the receivers of the message (p. 17). In other words, consumers are open to various unique, positive interpretations of the advertised brand, instead of just one (p. 17). All the while, they preserve an understanding of the main message of the ad (p. 17). Moreover, it is crucial to note that the consumer's preference of indirect claims also impacts consumer's brand preferences (p. 17). Consumers are evidenced to have a significantly stronger liking of brands using this type of advertising (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17).

Therefore, the theory of indirect persuasion sheds light on why different types of queer advertising can elicit different reactions and can result in varying attitudes toward the advertising brands (Um, 2016, p. 463). It explains why brands using subtle LGBTQ imagery

in their ads tend to be favoured over those with more direct and unambiguously queer visuals (Um, 2016, p. 470). Based on this, the first hypothesis and sub-hypothesis are stated.

H1: The explicitness of queer ads affects attitude toward brand.

H1a: The implicit queer ad evokes more positive attitude toward brand than the explicit queer ad.

2.3. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

As mentioned before, the implementation of queer symbols in advertising is aimed at displaying signs of support for the LGBTQ community (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 565). Given as prevalent homophobic attitudes remain a significant societal issue even in today's day and age, multiple corporations choose to contribute to the advocacy of queer rights (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023, p. 16). By advocating for the rights of social minorities, that the LGBTQ exemplifies, brands partake in *corporate social responsibility (CSR)* (Kotiloglu, 2023, p. 378). CSR has gained prominence in recent years, and many brands incorporate it in their advertising (Kotiloglu, 2023, p. 384). Such actions have the potential of being very valuable for many reasons. Firstly, because advertising can influence and drive social transformation through its use of media and communication (Ruggs, et al., 2018, p. 331). Secondly, studies evidence CSR participation's impact on consumers' preferences (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2019, p. 413). Research shows that most modern consumers nowadays prefer brands which partake in diversity initiatives (Ferraro, et al., 2023, p. 472). They, therefore, have a stronger liking and an overall more positive attitude towards brands that contribute to societally relevant topics (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2019, p. 415). Such contribution can be reflected in promoting "diversity and inclusion in all forms within advertising campaigns" (Wilkie et al., 2023, p. 721). Wilkie et al. (2023) researched consumers responses to such advertising and found that most of their interviewees perceive brands positively if they incorporate themes of diversity (p. 732). Similar results are evidenced by other scholars (Tingchi Liu et al., 2014, p. 188; Rodrigues & Borges, 2015, p. 697; Rivera et al., 2016, p. 111). For example, Rodrigues and Borges (2015) identified the consumers' different "dimensions of perceptions of CSR" (p. 690), one of which relates to advocating against discrimination. Queer advertising can contribute to this dimension, since as stated priorly, it elevates the visibility and displays support of the minority (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 557; Balirano, 2020, p. 56). Consequently, partaking in CSR plays a significant role in improving consumer's view of the brand (Ferraro, et al., 2023,

p. 472). Some scholars even evidenced positive influence of CSR on the motivation to purchase the brand's product (Rodrigues & Borges, 2015, p. 697). This illustrates how strongly a brand's contribution to, and advocacy for societal matters are appreciated by modern consumers.

However, although CSR tends to be preferred by consumers, it needs to be done in a certain way (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). Scholars show that if CSR is communicated too vigorously, it can dissuade consumers, and instil in them negative attitudes towards the company (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). Viererbl and Koch (2022) evaluated participants' responses to high vs. low extent of CSR communication, and discovered they were more likely to react negatively to those with high extent (p. 6). These findings can be applied to this study's focus on explicit vs. implicit communication and can also be explained with the previously mentioned concept of indirect persuasion (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 7). To reiterate, explicit communication prevents multiple readings of the message, and instead tends to enforce a singular interpretation (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17). In the case of explicit queer ads, which use highly visible LGBTQ symbols, this interpretation can entail expressing support for the LGBTQ community (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 557), or targeting specifically the minority (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 422). Although vouching for minorities' rights, and enhancing diversity initiatives ought to be sought after, doing so in a highly explicit manner can cause issues for brands (p. 423). Predominantly because such straightforward inclusion of queer themes can result in alienating consumers that are not part of the community (p. 423). This is particularly the case with the more explicit examples of LGBTQ campaigns, which can be perceived as solely targeted at this minority, and may isolate and estrange the mainstream consumers (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 423).

Therefore, as academic evidence shows, consumers value brands that meaningfully contribute to CSR (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2019, p. 415), provided that it is done in an implicit manner (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). This is due to explicit CSR communication often causing negative reactions in consumers (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). Knowing that CSR includes LGBTQ representation (Kotiloglu, 2023, p. 378), the following sub-hypotheses are stated on the comparison of queer ads with heterosexual ads:

H1b: The implicit queer ad evokes more positive attitude toward brand than the heterosexual ad.

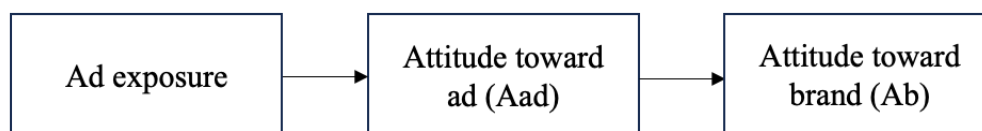
H1c: The explicit queer ad evokes less positive attitude toward brand than the heterosexual ad.

2.4. Attitude toward ad & attitude toward brand

Having established the specifics of queer advertising, and how its various types can impact the way consumers perceive a brand, it is vital to further elaborate on the remaining factors that can mediate the shaping of one's attitude toward brand. Within the advertising field, scholars emphasise the significant interrelation between how consumers react to a brand and an ad, and refer to it as *attitude toward ad* (Aad) and *attitude toward brand* (Ab) (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 48, 52). Mitchell and Olson (1981) define attitude as “an individual's internal evaluation” that can refer to, for example, the advertised product (p. 318). It is important for the advertisers for a plethora of reasons. Firstly, because the formed attitudes tend to remain constant, and are reliable for further assessments of the consumer's behaviour (Mitchell & Olson, 1981, p. 318). This alludes to the existence of a chained reaction between ad and brand attitudes (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 59). It is evidenced that ad attitude, either positive or negative, can in turn influence one's attitude toward a brand (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 61). Research shows a strong, and positive relationship between the two (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 61), thus demonstrating that one's attitude toward an ad can have a mediating effect on one's attitude toward a brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981, p. 330), as depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2.

Depiction of the mediating effect of Aad on Ab based on Mackenzie and Lutz (1989)



Similar findings on the linkage between ad and brand attitudes have been discovered in relation to queer advertising (Um, 2014, p. 822). Um (2014) found that a consumer's negative response to a queer ad coincided with their negative evaluation of the brand (p. 822). This substantiates that while much of the current research focuses on general advertising and its impact on brand attitudes, the insights on how ad attitudes influence brand attitudes are applicable to queer advertising as well. Based on the aforementioned findings, and with the aim to further understand the specific factors contributing to consumer's attitudes toward brand, the following hypothesis is stated on the attitude toward ad's mediating effect:

H2: The participants' negative attitude toward ad negatively affects their attitude toward the brand.

2.5. Rainbow-washing in queer advertising

Although brands take part in advocating for queer rights at an accelerating rate (Rusch, 2023, p. 1), the reception of how it is done is very mixed (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 405). Brands are often accused of *rainbow-washing*, a phenomenon which signifies engaging in advertising featuring LGBTQ references in a dishonest manner (Rice, 2022, p. 291). It is alike to companies being criticised for greenwashing, aka misleading its stakeholders with ingenuine environmental initiatives (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020, p. 1). Rainbow-washing stands for corporations declaring their support for the LGBTQ solely to attract consumers, and improve their profits (Rice, 2022, p. 291). Brands are aware of the growing importance of advocating for diversity, which leads them to implement queer symbols, such as rainbow flags, in their campaigns (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). However, instead of relying on the community's culturally significant symbols for the sake of genuine allyship with the minority, companies often do so to improve their promotional strategies, and audience perception (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Reliance on queer advertising can positively improve their image, as they can be perceived as aware of societal issues, and allies to the minority groups (Rice, 2022, p. 297). Unfortunately, in those cases, the use of LGBTQ references in brand's advertising has become only "a marketing feature to be added to their logos" (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Instead of upholding the expressed advocacy, certain companies fail to meet their implied commitments, or even act in direct opposition to them (Rice, 2022, p. 291). Therefore, by engaging in rainbow-washing, companies display false allyship with the queer communities that serves solely a deceptive marketing purpose of enhancing their image (Rice, 2022, p. 291; Rusch, 2023, p. 2).

There are many factors that contribute to an increased perception of rainbow-washing. Firstly, past research emphasises the risk of vagueness (Bernardino, 2021, p. 109). If in their communication companies lack specific information that supports their advocacy, audiences tend to question their integrity (Bernardino, 2021, p. 109). In relation to specifically queer-themed campaigns, rainbow-washing is most frequently perceived in ads released for Pride Month (Rusch, 2023, p. 2), which exemplify the explicit category of queer advertising. This is because such campaigns are often accused of a lack consistency in their support (p. 14). If brand's LGBTQ advocacy does not occur over a longer time period, and is instead limited

solely to one month a year, consumer scepticism, as well as their rainbow-washing perception rises (Rusch, 2023, p. 14, 21).

The existence of rainbow-washing has many implications. Most importantly for advertisers, it can strongly dissuade consumers and instil in them negative attitudes (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83). This result follows the established effect of *corporate hypocrisy* (p. 83). Scholars define it as “the belief that a firm does something that it is not” (p. 79), which in the discussed context means proclaiming genuine LGBTQ support. Detecting corporate hypocrisy elicits criticism and can strongly devalue the firm at fault (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83). This concept has been linked to studying rainbow-washing, as both signify deceitful and insincere actions done by companies that cause similar aversion in the consumer (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1436). There is plenty of evidence of companies receiving backlash after partaking in queer advertising that was deemed hypocritical (Rusch, 2023, p. 10, 12, 13; Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 400; Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441; Johns et al., 2022, p. 10). Research shows that if an advertisement is perceived to be rainbow-washing, the ad then tends to be negatively evaluated by the consumer (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441). Given the recognised impact of rainbow-washing on one’s attitude toward ad, supported by the effects of corporate hypocrisy, this study aims to further explore this relationship. Specifically, it examines the role of a serial mediation, as expressed in the third hypothesis, and depicted in figure 3.

H3: The participants’ perception of rainbow-washing negatively affects their attitude toward the ad.

Figure 3.

Depiction of the mediating effect of rainbow-washing on Aad and Ab adapted from Wulf et al. (2022)



2.6. LGBTQ involvement as a moderator

Previous sections focus on the mediating effects of various elements associated with the ads, such as Aad, Ab, and rainbow-washing, and their impact on consumer perceptions. The following part of this chapter turns to examine how specific consumers’ features contribute and moderate these perceptions. This angle was highlighted by past research, as it can enhance one’s understanding of the different factors that elicit different reactions to queer

advertising (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 432; Um, 2014, p. 823-824; Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441).

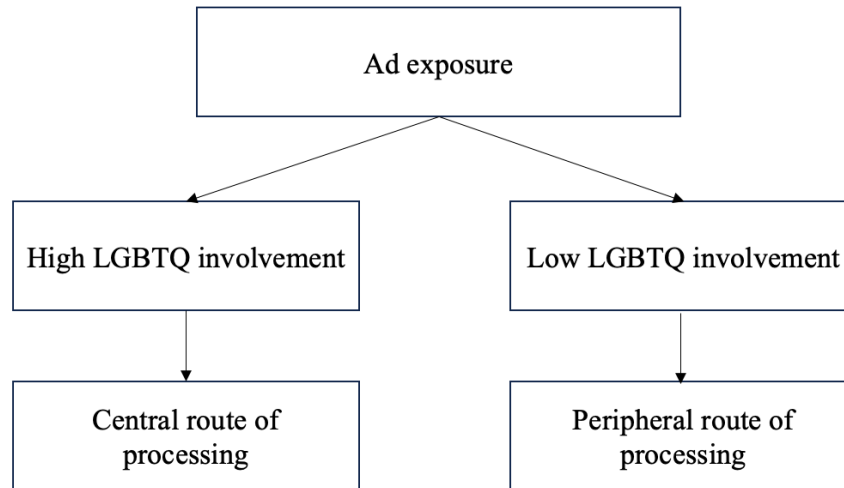
Existing studies studying consumers' responses to queer advertising often accentuate the significance of one's sexual orientation (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 432), attitude toward homosexuality (Um, 2014, p. 823-824), or LGBTQ involvement (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441). The latter can be understood by how concerned the respondent is with the LGBTQ community, or whether the state of the community affects their life (Wulf et al., 2022, Appendix A, p. 2). The significance of one's LGBTQ involvement has been particularly prominent in evaluating responses to the varying degree of queer imagery's explicitness and rainbow-washing perceptions (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1433). It was found that those more involved in the queer community, were significantly more likely to detect rainbow-washing than the less involved participants (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1446). Therefore, one's involvement has a moderating effect on rainbow-washing perception (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1441). Such result can be explained with Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (p. 11).

The ELM outlines two routes of interpreting persuasive communication, central and peripheral (p. 3, 10). In case of the latter, individuals following the peripheral cue do not process the message's arguments and their quality (p. 10, 18). The recipient's "motivation and/or ability" of interpretation are low, and their understanding of the message is superficial and limited (p. 11). On the other hand, those using the central route evaluate the message meticulously and diligently (p. 3). They thoroughly consider the claims and information included in the text (p. 3). In addition to this, they also rely on their own knowledge and past experiences when interpreting the message, which further facilitates their deeper understanding of it (p. 13).

Using the ELM, one can predict the following moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement on rainbow-washing perceptions. As priorly mentioned, rainbow-washing is present in advertisements that possess specific characteristics. In order to identify them, the recipient ought to process the ad thoroughly enough, following the ELM's central route. Such participants would then be required to possess both high motivation and ability to do so, thus being more involved in the queer community. In contrast, those less involved, who consider the ad only superficially and do not carefully examine it by following the peripheral route, are hence likely to fail to detect the rainbow-washing in any ad. Such use of the ELM offers explanation as to how one's LGBTQ involvement can moderate one's perception of rainbow-washing.

Figure 4.

Own illustrated application of Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) ELM routes of processing for LGBTQ involvement



Given that individuals with higher involvement are more inclined to follow ELM's central route (see figure 4) and thereby better identify rainbow-washing when it occurs, it is pertinent to explore this further. Specifically, an analysis of the types of advertisements that elicit different reactions based on varying levels of consumer involvement is required. As mentioned before, the explicit category of queer advertising, such as the Pride Month campaigns, are at a high risk of triggering rainbow-washing perceptions (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). This is predominantly due to such campaigns most often appearing for only one month a year, which is proven to create the impression of fleeting and superficial LGBTQ allyship (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Conversely, the implicit ads, such as queer ads that are not released for Pride Month, tend to be better perceived altogether (Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). This has been proven true for various types of consumers, including those that are part of the LGBTQ community (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 432). Moreover, the previously discussed indirect persuasion, exemplified by implicit ads, provides further insights related to involvement. According to Kardes (1988), indirect persuasion used in implicit advertisements elicits the most favourable reactions when consumers are highly involved with the advertising message (p. 231-232), which in the context of this research signifies those more involved with the LGBTQ. These findings suggest the following effects. Firstly, that the highly involved consumers are more thoughtfully considering the advertisement and are, therefore, more alert and more likely to detect rainbow-washing. Secondly, that explicit ads are more prone to appear as rainbow-washing, rather than the implicit ones. Thirdly, that low-involvement

individuals are unlikely to detect rainbow-washing overall, due to their limited and superficial processing of the ad. Based on this, the fourth hypothesis and sub-hypotheses are stated. The visualisation of all hypotheses is presented in figure 5.

H4: LGBTQ involvement moderates the perception of rainbow-washing.

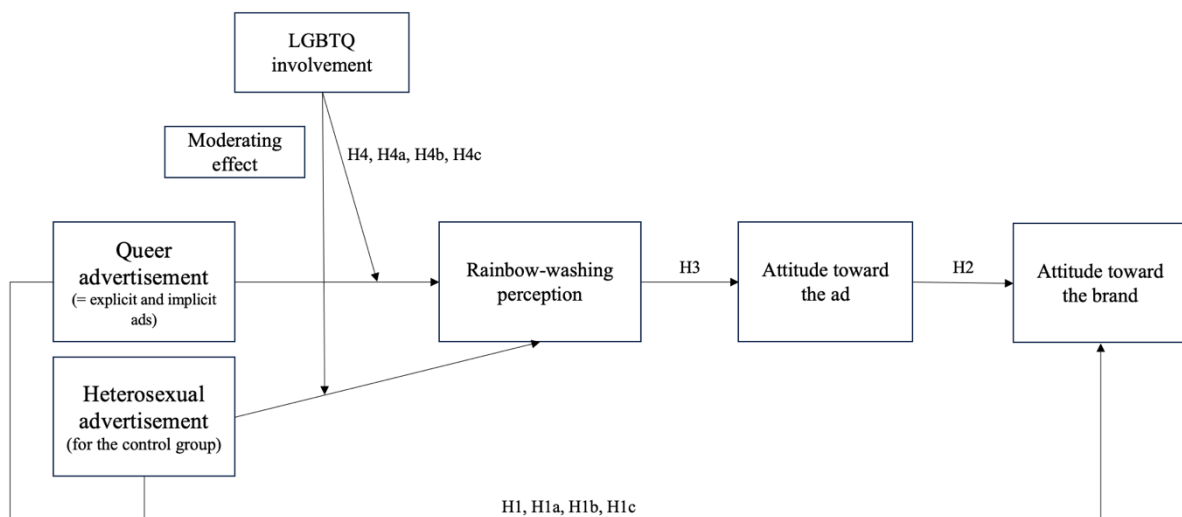
H4a: High LGTBQ involvement strengthens the perception of rainbow-washing after explicit queer ad exposure.

H4b: High LGTBQ involvement weakens the perception of rainbow-washing after implicit queer ad exposure.

H4c: Low LGTBQ involvement weakens the perception of rainbow-washing after heterosexual ad exposure.

Figure 5.

Visualisation of the hypotheses



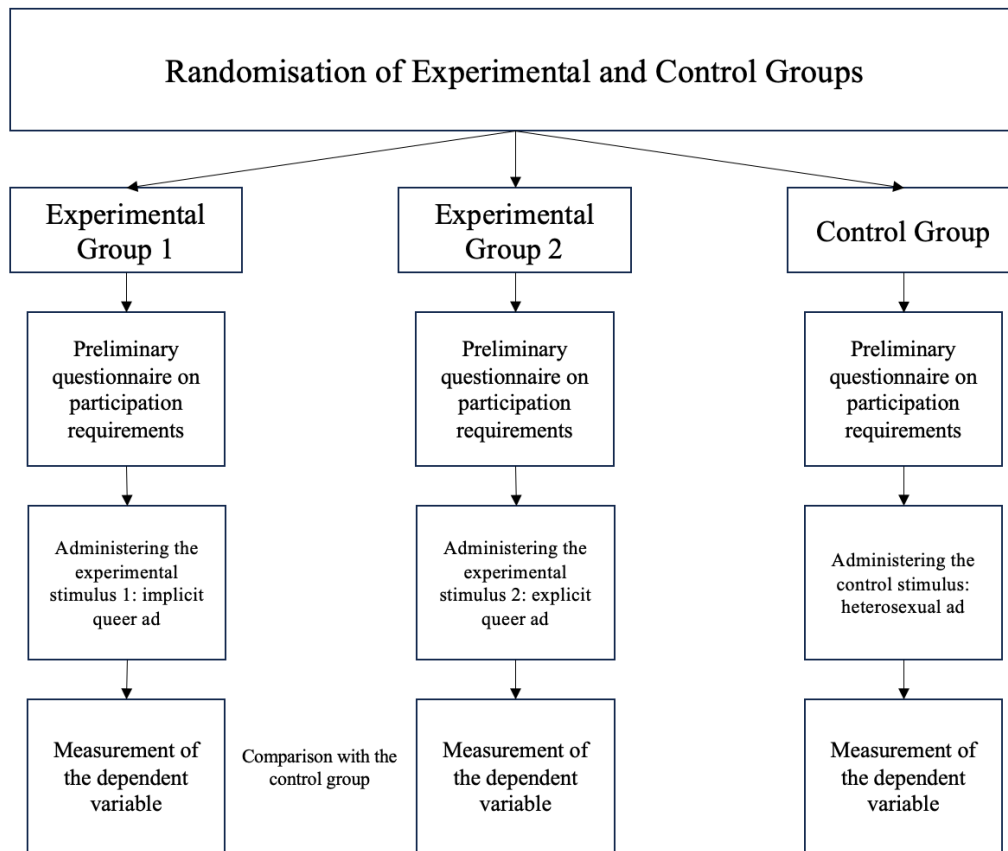
3. Method

3.1. Research design

The aim of this research was to investigate the influence of different types of queer advertising, and non-queer advertising on consumer's attitude toward the brand. To test the hypotheses, this research followed a 3-level (advertising type: explicit queer advertising x implicit queer advertising x heterosexual advertising) between-subjects experiment. Since the purpose was to examine the causal relation between various variables, and how they affect one's response, the chosen research method was a quantitative online experiment (Babbie, 2007, p. 234). This method allows to determine how meticulously crafted conditions impact the respondents' reactions (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 83). The conditions involve using "manipulated advertising stimuli to test the effect of these manipulations" (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 85), which in the context of this research signify two queer and one non-queer ads.

The experiment took the form of a basic experimental design, as proposed by Babbie (2007, p. 234-236). It involved a randomisation procedure, which arbitrarily divided the research participants into three groups. Each group was shown a different ad – an explicit queer ad, an implicit queer ad, and a heterosexual ad. Respondents who were shown the latter ad served the role of the control group. Visualisation of the experimental procedure is depicted in figure 6.

Figure 6.
 Depiction of the experimental procedure, adapted from Babbie (2007)



3.2. Stimuli

Three versions of an advertisement for a chocolate bar from the same and fictitious brand called *Swirl* were created for the purpose of the experiment. This specific product was selected because hedonic products, which chocolate exemplifies, are most effective and most used in Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) (Melero & Montaner, 2016, p. 164-165). Since academics consider LGBTQ advertising a part of CRM (Szyndlar & Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2019, p. 217), such product was deemed apt for using it as the stimulus material.

All ads were still images that had been AI generated with the use of ChatGPT 4, and are presented in Appendix A (OpenAI, 2023). Once AI created three separate images based on the researcher's prompts (see Appendix C), the graphics were then transferred to Canva and Photoshop. The ads were then edited to ensure each ad presented the same slogan, brand, logo, and design of the advertised product to minimise potential biases related to the aforementioned. Each ad featured a different couple, based on the level of explicitness of queer references.

The explicitness of the LGBTQ themes was differentiated following Oakenfull and Greenlee's (2005) approach (p. 428). The implicit advertisement with a low level of queer themes-inclusion involved a male homosexual couple sitting on a couch, who are affectionately holding each other as they share the advertised chocolate bar. The bottom of the ad included a subheading stating: "Share the moment. Share the Swirl". The explicit queer ad had multiple LGBTQ references (e.g., rainbow flags, mentions of Pride), and it exemplified a Pride Month campaign. It also featured a male homosexual couple in a very similar setting as the previous ad. The inclusion of the queer references created a clear and unmistakable affiliation with the LGBTQ community. In addition to this, there were two subtexts present. The first one stated, "limited Pride Month edition", and the second, repeated the slogan used in the other ads, with a one-word adjustment. Instead of "Share the moment. Share the Swirl", it read "Share the Pride. Share the Swirl", to further accentuate the ad's queer and Pride Month reference. The final ad, given to the control group, did not feature any queer themes whatsoever. It repeated the same slogan, scene, and environment, where a romantically involved heterosexual couple shares a chocolate bar.

3.3. Sampling procedure

This study opted for purposive sampling, which served the following objective. It allowed to solely consider individuals who aligned with the research aim (Obilor, 2023, p. 4), which was to investigate the perception of Gen Z's living in the Netherlands. Therefore, it facilitated obtaining detailed knowledge about relevant type of participants, and exclude responses that did not meet the criteria (Obilor, 2023, p. 4). In addition to this, snowball sampling was used, since it enabled approaching specific individuals and groups of individuals "that most closely aligned with the target population" on social media platforms (Leighton et al., 2021, p. 38).

To be included in this research, the participants had to meet two criteria. Firstly, they had to live in the Netherlands at the time of the study. Secondly, they were required to be members of the Gen Z generation, which includes people born between 1997-2012 (Dimock, 2019, para 5). However, to avoid unethical considerations of researching minors, the participants are required to be at least 18 years old (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015, p. 127). Therefore, to be included in this research, the participants must have been born between 1997-2006. The study was conducted entirely in English, thus English proficiency was required.

Recruitment as well as the experiment took place online for the convenience of the subjects, thus facilitating easier participation (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 91). The

researcher shared a link to the questionnaire across various social media platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. It was then reposted by more people to share with their followers. In addition to this, the link to the experiment was shared on SurveySwap and SurveyCircle. The two platforms specialise in connecting researchers seeking participants, thus expanding the reach of their studies. This allowed reaching various groups of individuals to maximise participation.

3.4. Research procedure

The experiment began with a consent form providing the participants with fundamental information about the study. It guaranteed anonymity, provided the researcher's contact details, and outlined the purpose of the research being a Master's thesis on consumer's attitude toward a brand. Specifying that the focus was placed on queer advertising was omitted to avoid any premature bias. The form also assured the respondents that they are allowed to withdraw from the experiment at any moment with no repercussions. In order to proceed with the experiment, participants were required to state that they consented to taking part in the study, and to the use and retention of the data they choose to share. In case they did not give consent, the experiment would stop immediately. Following this, a brief questionnaire was given to determine whether they fit the requirement criteria, which were the participants' age and their Dutch residency. Only those matching the conditions were allowed to proceed. Including this preliminary questionnaire ensured that only the intended target group took part in the study. Once this was confirmed, each participant was exposed to a randomly assigned stimulus, meaning one of the three investigated ads. Prior to being presented with an advertisement, a disclaimer was included, which informed the participants to carefully look at the advertisement that they are about to see, as they are not able to see it again.

Following the respondents' exposure to the stimuli in the form of one of the three aforementioned ads, they were given a questionnaire to fulfil. As recommended by Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017), the questions were arranged in "reverse-causal order" (p. 89). This signifies that the first block regarded the dependent variable – attitude toward brand. The subsequent ones were consecutively focused on ad and rainbow-washing perceptions, both of which are the mediating variables. Then the moderating effect of the LGBTQ involvement was measured. In addition to this, for contextual information, demographic questions were asked about the participants' gender, nationality, education level, and sexual orientation. Finally, to establish the manipulation check, few questions were given about the

type of product that was advertised, who was the featured couple, and whether the ad was a limited collection for Pride Month. At the end of the questionnaire, a debrief was included outlining the specific purpose of the research being the effect of different types of queer advertising on brand attitudes. All investigated ads were also presented, and it was disclosed that they were AI-generated, and the brand was fictitious. The questionnaire is included in Appendix B. The next subsection outlines the sampling process, and the specific requirements for participation.

3.5. Sample

In total, 238 responses were recorded. However, after excluding the participants who did not meet the participation criteria, and who did not finish the survey, the final sample amounted to 154 participants. The majority of the subjects were female, as the study recorded 105 women (69.5%), 48 men (31.8%), and 1 non-binary person (0.7%). The age varied between 20-27 years old, with the average being 24.16 ($SD = 1.65$). The participants were of 38 different nationalities, ranging across Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South Americas. Given that the study focused on Dutch residents, and the researcher has a Polish background, it is unsurprising that the results reflected these characteristics. Most respondents were Dutch ($n = 37$, 24%), Polish ($n = 18$, 11.7%), and Italian ($n = 12$, 7.8%). There were many individuals representing various other nationalities, for example American ($n = 1$, 0.6%), Argentine ($n = 1$, 0.6%), Filipino ($n = 1$, 0.6%), or South African ($n = 1$, 0.6%). In terms of sexual orientation, 116 participants were heterosexual (75.3%), 14 bisexual (9.1%), 13 homosexual (8.4%), 7 identified as queer (4.5%), 1 asexual (0.6%), and 1 pansexual (0.6%). Two respondents preferred not to disclose this information (1.3%). Finally, the majority of the sample obtained a high level of education, 86 participants had a Bachelor's or equivalent degree (55.8%), 61 a Master's or equivalent (39.6%), 5 a secondary education (3.2%), and 2 selected "other" (1.3%). Table 1 outlines the demographic information of respondents in each group. Due to the vast diversity of nationalities, this information was omitted from the table.

Table 1*Descriptive statistics of participants in each group*

		Group 1: Implicit Queer Ad <i>n</i> = 55	Group 2: Explicit Queer Ad <i>n</i> = 55	Group 3 (Control group): Heterosexual Ad <i>n</i> = 44
Variable	Value	Percentage		
Age		<i>M</i> = 24.25 <i>SD</i> = 1.73	<i>M</i> = 24.10 <i>SD</i> = 1.62	<i>M</i> = 24.09 <i>SD</i> = 1.63
Gender	Male	32.7%	25.5%	36.4%
	Female	65.5%	74.5%	63.6%
	Non-binary	1.8%	0%	0%
Sexual orientation	LGBTQ	20%	29.1%	25%
	Non-LGBTQ	80%	70.9%	75%
Education	Secondary education	1.8%	5.5%	2.3%
	Bachelor's	49.1%	52.7%	68.2%
	Master's	47.3%	40%	13%
	Other	1.8%	1.8%	0%

3.6. Measurements and reliability

3.6.1. Attitude toward brand (Ab).

Attitude toward brand (Ab) was measured with a Likert-scale, used by Spears and Singh (2004), which consisted of 11 items (p. 58). The scale was adapted for the purposes of this study, by omitting items irrelevant to measure in the context of the current study such as feeling soothed or stimulated by the ad. Two questions measured one's brand attitude, the first one being: "How did the brand make you feel?". Six feelings were listed, three positive: good; cheerful; pleased, and three negative: insulted; irritated; repulsed. The second question regarded one's thoughts about the brand: "Do you think the brand was...". The available options were: "pleasant", "likable", "interesting", "tasteful", "good". The respondents replied to both questions by choosing the extent to which they agree or disagree. Consequently, a 7-point Likert scale was used with 1 being strongly disagree, and 7 strongly agree.

Factor analysis was conducted for variables on attitude toward brand, which permitted grouping of items. Before proceeding, items referring to negative brand attitudes were recoded, and the newly recoded variables were used for factor analysis. The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .92, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$). Given that the variable included more than 3 items, all of which were measured on a continuous scale, the a-posteriori criteria were met, and brand attitude was suitable for factor analysis (Van Prooijen, 2023, p. 4).

Eleven items measuring attitude toward a brand were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = 0.92$, $\chi^2 (N = 154, 55) = 1434.64$, $p < .001$. The resultant model explained 63.66% of the variance in brand attitude. Factor loadings of the individual items onto the two factors are presented in table 2. The factors found were:

Positive Attitude toward Brand. The first factor included eight items that related participants' positive brand attitude. This included feelings and/or thoughts of the brand as cheerful, interesting, tasteful, and pleasant.

Negative Attitude toward Brand. The second factor included three items that related participants' negative brand attitude. This included the brand causing feelings of repulsion and irritation.

Table 2

Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale "attitude toward brand".

How did the brand make you feel? / Do you think the brand was...	<i>Positive Brand Attitude</i>	<i>Negative Brand Attitude</i>
Cheerful	.91	
Interesting	.89	
Pleased	.88	
Good	.87	
Good	.80	

Likable	.77	
Tasteful	.76	
Pleasant	.74	
Insulted		.96
Repulsed		.80
Irritated		.73
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	7.00	1.29
<i>Cronbach's α</i>	.95	.84

All scales were adapted from existing studies, however, to further assess the reliability of the items, reliability analysis was conducted. The results show high Cronbach's α for both components, reporting .95 for positive attitude toward brand and .84 for negative attitude toward brand.

Finally, both brand attitude variables were computed into new variables as the mean of answers of each: POS_AB for positive brand attitude ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.16$) and NEG_AB for negative brand attitude ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 1.19$).

Although both positive and negative brand attitudes were measured to ensure enough variety in the scale, only the variable for positive brand attitude was considered in the analyses in the forthcoming chapters. This was done to ensure alignment with hypotheses, and to facilitate easier readability.

3.6.2. Attitude toward Ad (Aad).

For measuring attitude toward ad (Aad), the same 11-item, Likert-scale by Spears and Singh (2004) was used as for attitude toward brand (p. 58). The two questions devoted to this variable were "How did the ad make you feel?" and "Do you think the ad was...". Since the scale remained consistent with the previous measurement, the same adjectives were used as items. The participants' answers were also evaluated with the same Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Items related to negative ad attitude were recoded before proceeding to the factor analysis. The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .91, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), thus ad attitude was appropriate for factor analysis.

11 items measuring attitude toward ad were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = 0.91$, $\chi^2 (N = 154, 55) = 1773.05$, $p < 0.001$. The resultant

model explained 66.2% of the variance in ad attitude . Factor loadings of the individual items onto the two factors are presented in table 3. The factors found were:

Positive Ad Attitude. The first factor included eight items that related participants' positive ad perception. This included feelings and/or thoughts of the ad as cheerful, interesting, tasteful, and pleasant.

Negative Ad Attitude. The second factor included three items that related participants' negative ad perceptions. This included the brand ad feelings of repulsion and irritation.

The reliability analysis for ad attitude showed .96 Cronbach's α for positive ad attitude and .81 for negative ad attitude, thus illustrating high reliability of both scales.

The two ad attitude variables were then computed into new variables as the average response for each: POS_AAD for positive ad attitude ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.31$), and NEG_AAD for negative ad attitude ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.22$). Just as with brand attitude variables, only the variable for positive ad attitude was used in the upcoming data analysis to remain consistent with the hypotheses and easier readability.

Table 3

Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale "ad attitude".

How did the ad make you feel? / Do you think the ad was...	<i>Positive Ad Attitude</i>	<i>Negative Ad Attitude</i>
Good	.94	
Likable	.91	
Cheerful	.90	
Good	.89	
Pleased	.89	
Pleasant	.89	
Interesting	.87	
Tasteful	.81	
Insulted		.93
Repulsed		.78

Irritated		.74
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	7.28	1.39
<i>Cronbach's α</i>	.96	.81

3.6.3. *Rainbow-washing.*

Rainbow-washing perception was assessed using a scale created by combining the scales from Wulf et al. (2022, Appendix A, p. 2), and Johns et al. (2022, p. 9), and adapting them for the purposes of this research. Each item used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), and included, for example: "I think this brand is reliable in terms of supporting the LGBTQ community". The remaining items are presented in table 4.

As with the brand and ad attitude variables, the same steps were taken to refine the rainbow-washing variable. Items that convey positive phrases were recoded, and then subjected to factor analysis, along with the remaining rainbow-washing variables.

The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .81, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), therefore rainbow-washing perception was suitable for factor analysis.

9 items measuring rainbow-washing perception were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = 0.81$, $\chi^2 (N = 154, 36) = 768.21$, $p < 0.001$. The resultant model explained 41.06% of the variance in rainbow-washing perception. Factor loadings of the individual items onto the two factors are shown in table 4. Item referring to the vagueness of the ad's LGBTQ support was matched in both the first and the second component. Due to the factor analysis not showing clear distinction between components, this item was removed from consideration. All in all, the factors found were:

Absence of Rainbow-Washing. The first factor included four items that related participants' lack of rainbow-washing perception. This included viewing the advertisement as reliable in supporting the LGBTQ.

Presence of Rainbow-Washing. The second factor included five items that related participants' negative ad perceptions. This included perceiving the advertisement as deceiving and omitting information regarding its support of the LGBTQ.

The reliability analysis for rainbow-washing perception showed .94 Cronbach's α for lack of this perception and .70 for its presence, therefore confirming satisfactory reliability of both scales.

The two rainbow-washing perception variables were then computed into new variables as the average response for each: RW_YES for the presence of rainbow-washing ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.21$), and RW_NO for the absence of rainbow-washing ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.61$). As mentioned before, measuring both the presence and absence of rainbow-washing perception enabled variety of the scale. However, all related to it hypothesis regard the presence of rainbow-washing, therefore only the variable for presence of rainbow-washing is used for the upcoming analyses reported in the findings chapter.

Table 4

Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale "rainbow-washing perception".

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	<i>Absence of Rainbow-Washing</i>	<i>Presence of Rainbow-Washing</i>
I think this brand is reliable in terms of supporting the LGBTQ community	.91	
I like the way the LGTBQ community is supported by this brand.	.90	
I think this brand delivers on its promise to support the LGBTQ community.	.92	
I think this brand is authentic in its support of the LGBTQ community.	.89	
This advertisement deceives with words to support the LGBTQ community.		.71

This advertisement uses images and graphic elements to pretend to support the LGBTQ community.		.80
The advertisement is vague regarding its support for the LGBTQ community.	[.54]	[.45]
The advertisement exaggerates its support of the LGBTQ community.		.81
The advertisement omits important information regarding its support of the LGBTQ community.		.56
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	3.70	2.34
<i>Cronbach's α</i>	.94	.70

3.6.4. LGBTQ involvement.

LGBTQ involvement was measured with a Likert-scale used by Wulf and colleagues (2022, Appendix A, p. 2). As with the other scales, it was slightly modified to accommodate the goal of this study, by excluding an item referring to one's consumer behaviour contributing to the LGBTQ. This was omitted, as it was deemed to refrain too far from the aim of this research. Additionally, the scale also included one item from Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius (1995, p. 49) that considered one's willingness to take action to support environmental matters. However, for the purposes of this research, it was adjusted for LGBTQ matters. Using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), the respondents answered four items (see table 5), including: "I care about the equality for the LGBTQ community".

Finally, factor analysis was run for items measuring the participant's LGBTQ involvement. The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .77, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), therefore this variable was well-suited for this analysis.

4 items measuring one's LGBTQ involvement were entered into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), $KMO = 0.77$, $\chi^2 (N = 154, 6) = 345.85$, $p < 0.001$. The resultant

model explained 73.67% of the variance in LGBTQ involvement. Factor analysis grouped all items into the same component, and the loadings are presented in table 5.

The reliability of the scale for LGBTQ involvement was confirmed ($\alpha = .87$). The variables were then computed into a new variable as the average response ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.16$).

Table 5

Factor loadings, explained variance and reliability of the two factors found for the scale "LGBTQ involvement".

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	<i>LGBTQ Involvement</i>
I care about the equality for the LGBTQ community	.82
Equality for the LGBTQ community has a positive impact on my quality of life	.87
I am willing to take action to support the LGBTQ community	.92
I am willing to spend more money on products if companies are committed to the LGBTQ community	.83
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	2.95
<i>Cronbach's α</i>	.87

3.7. Validity

The methodological approach of this research was motivated by increasing this study's validity. Firstly, to enhance internal validity, and ensure no external factors affect the results of the study, this research opted for AI generated ads of a non-existing brand (Mallinson, 2019, p. 3). This choice ensured the absence of any preconceived notions surrounding a known brand (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 86). It also guaranteed consistency among participants who were exposed to the three different types of images (p. 85). Consequently, ads deriving from the same brand, which were similarly, but not identically constructed, could have been compared. Using AI also allowed a high level of control over the specific characteristics of the used ad (p. 85). This included, for example placing the couple in each ad in a peaceful and undisturbed domestic environment, where only the two people that are

relevant for this research are visible. Such setting minimised the risk of diverting the respondent's attention from the crucial element of the manipulation (p. 85). Lastly, using AI was cost-effective, and it eliminated the need for ethical considerations that would be required if real people participated in the ad production. Overcoming these strict criteria with a real brand's advertising would be challenging. Therefore, this approach granted the researcher a higher degree of control, by eliminating any unrelated external factors (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 84). Although fictitious, all advertisements, along with the brand, were generated with the aim to closely resemble a real-life ad that the participants could encounter in their everyday. This was done to guarantee external validity (Mallinson, 2019, p. 3).

Moreover, each measurement described in the prior section, was derived from a peer-reviewed, academic source, and it aimed to measure solely the exact concepts that were the focus of the study, thus contributing to the study's construct validity (Babbie, 2007, p. 153). In addition, the used measurements were meticulously selected to ensure they encompass the entire extent of "meanings included within a concept", thus ensuring content validity (Babbie, 2007, p. 154). This included, for example, measuring both the participant's feelings and thoughts about the brand and ad, to gain a better understanding of their attitudes to each.

3.8. Data analysis

Following data collection, the data was exported from Qualtrics into SPSS. Firstly, the researcher removed unnecessary items that were included by Qualtrics, for example *StartDate*, *EndDate*, or *Duration*. This step also involved filtering out responses that were not suitable for analysis, such as those that were incomplete, or not fitting the participation requirements.

To establish the type of ad's effect on attitude toward brand, with attitude toward ad and rainbow-washing's mediating effects, this research opted for the Serial Multiple Mediator Model (model 6) by PROCESS macro (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 180-181). This analysis enabled examining the influence of the independent variable (type of ad) on the dependent (attitude toward brand), with the inclusion of mediating variables (attitude toward ad and the presence of rainbow-washing) (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 180).

For exploring the moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement on the type of ad's influence on rainbow-washing perception, the Moderation Analysis (model 1) by PROCESS macro was used (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 234). This analysis facilitated examining how the X's effect on Y is shaped by W's influence (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 234).

Comparison of brand attitudes between the three ads was analysed with a General Linear Model. This analysis facilitated the comparison of means of multiple groups, which in the case of this research signified groups being shown three different types of stimuli – explicit, implicit, or heterosexual ad (Field, 2009, p. 348).

3.9. Manipulation checks

Before proceeding to the analysing the results of the experiment, three manipulations checks were conducted. As mentioned in the research procedure section, three questions were asked to the respondents, whether they registered the manipulated element of the stimulus. For this reason, a Chi-Square test was conducted, with a comparison between the type of ad and the manipulation check (Field, 2009, p. 691-692).

The first manipulation check regarded the advertised product. The results of the Chi-Square test reveal no significant associations between the type of ad, and the recall of the advertised product $\chi^2(2, N = 154) = 1.81, p = 0.404$. As presented in table 6, only one person, who was shown the explicit ad did not recall being showed chocolate, while the rest of the sample answered correctly.

Table 6

Recall differences of the advertised product in different types of ads.

	<i>Chocolate bar</i>	<i>I don't remember</i>	Total
Heterosexual ad	100%	0%	44
Implicit queer ad	100%	0%	55
Explicit queer ad	98.2%	1.8%	55
Total	99.4%	0.6%	154
Chi-Square	1.81***		

Significance: *** $p = 0.404$

Notes: the percentages indicate responses within each experimental group

The second manipulation check investigated the recognition of the couple included in the ad. The reported results found a significant association between the type of ad and the recall of the coupled featured in the ad $\chi^2(6, N = 154) = 256.66, p < 0.001$. The majority of respondents accurately selected the type of couple that corresponded with the stimulus (see table 7).

Table 7

Recall differences of the advertised couple in different types of ads.

	<i>A heterosexual couple in a regular setting</i>	<i>A homosexual couple in a regular setting</i>	<i>A homosexual couple in a Pride Month inspired setting</i>	<i>I don't remember</i>	Total
Heterosexual ad	95.5%	0%	2.3%	2.3%	44
Implicit queer ad	1.8%	98.2%	0%	0%	55
Explicit queer ad	0%	14.5%	85.5%	0%	55
Total	27.9%	40.3%	31.2%	0.6%	154
Chi-Square	256.66***				

Significance: *** $p < 0.001$

Notes: the percentages indicate responses within each experimental group

Finally, the third manipulation check tested whether the participants registered whether the shared ad was a limited Pride Month edition. The results of the Chi-Square test reveal significant associations between the type of ad, and the recall of whether the ad was a limited Pride Month edition $\chi^2(4, N = 154) = 77.27, p < 0.001$. This indicates that the type of ad the participants were exposed to, influenced their recognition of whether the ad was a limited Pride Month edition. However, as the results presented in table 8 show, many individuals did not remember the answer. Nonetheless, most of the sample still answered correctly.

Table 8

Recall differences of the limited Pride Month edition in different types of ads.

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>I don't remember</i>	Total
Heterosexual ad	2.3%	75%	22.7%	44
Implicit queer ad	0%	74.5%	25.5%	55
Explicit queer ad	47.3%	9.1%	43.6%	55
Total	17.5%	51.3%	31.2%	154
Chi-Square	77.27			

Significance: *** $p < 0.001$

Notes: the percentages indicate responses within each experimental group

4. Findings

4.1. The effect of type of ad on attitude toward brand

The first hypothesis regarded the influence of various levels of explicitness of queer ads on attitude toward brand. Since this research examined three types of ads being shown to three different groups of respondents, and their effect on brand attitude, a General Linear Model (GLM) was chosen (Field, 2009, p. 348).

The analysis was conducted with type of ad as independent variable (Con_num) and positive brand attitude (POS_AB) as the dependent variable. The types of ads were coded as 1 = heterosexual ad, 2 = implicit ad, 3 = explicit ad. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for the type of ad on brand attitude, $F(2, 151) = 6.21, p = 0.003$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$. The effect size shows that 7.6% of the variance in brand perception can be attributed to the type of ad ($R^2 = 0.076$). These findings support hypothesis 1.

The first sub-hypothesis (H1a) predicted that the implicit queer ad would evoke more positive attitude toward brand than the explicit queer ad, however the results of the Tukey post-hoc test disproved this. The difference between brand attitude of the implicit and explicit queer ads was not statistically significant ($p = 0.824$). Therefore, H1a was rejected.

The remaining comparisons between ads reached significance. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that participants showed the implicit queer ad resulted in a significantly higher positive brand attitude ($M = 6.41, SD = 0.94$) than those exposed to a heterosexual ad with no queer references, $p = 0.003$. This validated H1b. However, Tukey post-hoc comparisons reported that explicit queer ad significantly evoked more positive attitude toward brand ($M = 6.16, SD = 1.17$) than the heterosexual ad ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.34$), $p = 0.017$, thus rejecting H1c. The GLM results are depicted in table 9.

Table 9

Descriptive statistics of the types of ads used for a General Linear Model

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	N
Implicit queer ad	6.41	0.94	55
Explicit queer ad	6.16	1.17	55
Heterosexual ad	5.55	1.34	44

4.2. The mediating effect of rainbow-washing and attitude toward ad on attitude toward brand

A mediation analysis was carried out using PROCESS macro (Model 6) with two mediators, to investigate the mediating effects of rainbow-washing and attitude toward ad on attitude toward brand, following the exposure to an advertisement (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 180-181). To test this, the variables indicating the perception of rainbow-washing (RW_YES), positive ad attitude (POS_AAD), positive brand attitude (POS_AB), and the type of ad were used (Con_num). The analysis was conducted based on a bootstrap of 5000 samples with standard bias-corrected estimates and 95% confidence intervals. Although model 6 in PROCESS enables both the indirect and direct effects of variables (see figure 7), which is reflected upon below, the hypotheses of this research focused on examining the indirect effects (see figure 8).

Figure 7

Conceptual diagram, of the original model 6 for PROCESS macro – Serial Multiple Mediator Model (Hayes & Little, 2022)

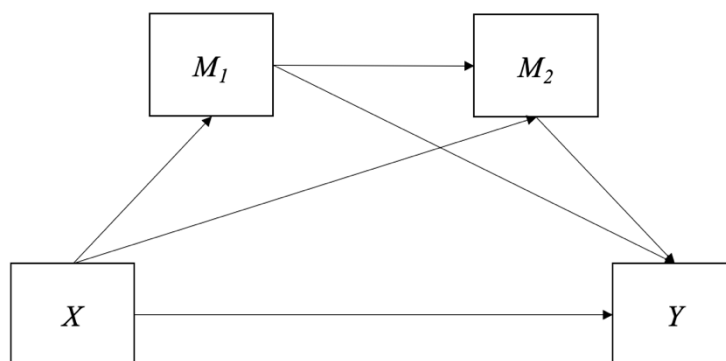
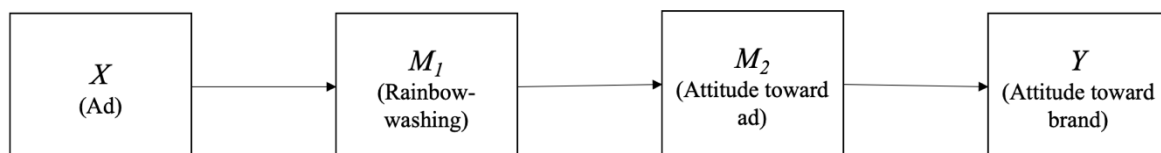


Figure 8

Depiction of the adapted for this research model 6 for PROCESS macro – serial mediation (Hayes & Little, 2022)



The study assessed the serial mediation with rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward ad serially mediating the relationship between ad type and attitude toward brand. The

ad type (X) was a multicategorical variable, coded as 1-heterosexual ad, 2-implicit queer ad, 3-explicit queer ad.

The results revealed a significant indirect effect of ad type on brand attitude through rainbow-washing perception and ad attitude ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.11$, $95\% CI = [0.02, 0.45]$). The serial mediation pathway through rainbow-washing and ad attitude was as well significant ($b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $95\% CI = [-0.17, -0.01]$), showing that ad type affects brand attitude through its sequential influence on rainbow-washing and ad attitude.

When tested separately, the analysis showed that rainbow-washing perception significantly influences one's attitude toward ad ($b = -0.27$, $t = -3.17$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.002$, $95\% CI = [-0.44, -0.10]$). This indicates that with each increase of rainbow-washing perception, one's ad attitude becomes more negative, by decreasing by 0.27 units. However, the predictive strength is low, as only 10% of the difference in ad attitude can be attributed to rainbow-washing ($R^2 = 0.10$). Nonetheless, this finding supports hypothesis 3.

Secondly, this study explored the effect of attitude toward ad on attitude toward brand, and the analysis evidenced statistical significance ($b = 0.81$, $t = 31.72$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$, $95\% CI = [0.76, 0.86]$). Therefore, positive attitude toward the ad increases positive attitude toward the brand by 0.81 units. As much as 89% of the change in brand attitude can be based on ad attitude ($R^2 = 0.89$). Hypothesis 2 is thus supported.

In addition, the analysis outlined the influence of each type of ad on attitude toward ad and rainbow-washing perception. In comparison with the heterosexual ad, both the implicit queer ad ($b = 0.88$, $t = 3.50$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = 0.001$, $95\% CI = [0.38, 1.37]$) and the explicit queer ad ($b = 0.84$, $t = 3.29$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = 0.001$, $95\% CI = [0.34, 1.35]$) have positive effects on ad attitude. In the case of ad type's impact on rainbow-washing, the implicit queer ad showed no significance ($p = 0.282$), and the explicit reported significance ($b = 0.68$, $t = 2.83$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = 0.005$, $95\% CI = [0.21, 1.16]$) when juxtaposed with the heterosexual ad.

Lastly, this analysis indicated rainbow-washing's influence on brand attitude ($b = -0.07$, $t = -2.66$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.009$, $95\% CI = [-0.13, -0.02]$). Similarly to ad attitude, rainbow-washing decreases positive brand attitude, and can account for 89% difference in the attitude toward brand ($R^2 = 0.89$).

The direct effect of ad type on brand attitude in presence of the mediators was not found significant ($p = 0.098$). Hence, this analysis reported a full serial mediation of rainbow-washing and ad attitude on the relationship between ad type and attitude toward brand. The mediation is competitive, as the indirect effects are both positive and negative. Mediation summary is presented in table 10.

Table 10

Summary of findings of the mediation analysis from PROCESS macro - model 4 (Hayes & Little, 2022)

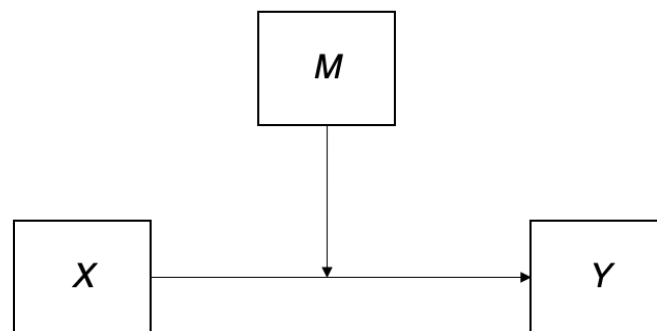
Variable	Ad attitude		Brand attitude	
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i> -value	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Rainbow-washing	-0.27	0.002	-0.07	0.009
Ad attitude	-	-	0.81	< 0.001
R ²	0.10		0.89	

4.3. The moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement on rainbow-washing perception

To test the final, fourth hypothesis, along with its sub-hypotheses (H4, H4a, H4b, H4c), model 1 PROCESS macro was used for simple moderation (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 348). This allowed to examine the influence the type of ad (Con_num) on one's rainbow-washing perception (RW_YES), with the moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement (LGBTQInvolvement) (Hayes & Little, 2022, p. 348). The visualisation is presented in figure 9.

Figure 9

Conceptual diagram of model 1 for PROCESS macro - simple moderation (Hayes & Little, 2022)



The analysis utilised 5,000 bootstrap samples to generate 95% confidence intervals for the interaction effect and main effects. The overall model was significant, indicating that the type of ad (IV) and the moderating LGBTQ involvement (M) collectively influence one's rainbow-washing perception (DV) ($R^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$, $F(3, 150) = 7.11$).

The results demonstrated a significant effect of the type of ad (explicit, implicit, heterosexual) on the perception of rainbow-washing ($b = 0.55$, $t = 4.55$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$, 95% $CI [0.31, 0.79]$). The types of ads were coded as 1 = heterosexual ad, 2 = implicit ad, 3 = explicit ad. The findings indicate that as the condition number (type of ad) increased, the rainbow-washing perception also increased. In other words, the most rainbow-washing was detected in the explicit ad, and the least in the heterosexual ad.

The moderating effect of LGBTQ involvement on rainbow-washing perception was not significant ($p = 0.650$). Therefore, although the type of ad evokes various levels of rainbow-washing perception, one's LGBTQ involvement does not moderate this difference. Consequently, hypotheses H4, H4a, H4b, and H4c were rejected. Summary of all hypothesis testing is presented in table 11.

Table 11
Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Description	Status
H1	The explicitness of queer ads affects attitude toward brand.	Supported
H1a	Implicit queer ad evokes more positive attitude toward the brand than the explicit queer ad.	Rejected
H1b	The implicit queer ad evokes more positive attitude toward the brand than the heterosexual ad.	Rejected
H1c	The explicit queer ad evokes less positive attitude toward the brand than the heterosexual ad.	Supported
H2	The participants' positive attitude toward ad positively affects their attitude toward the brand.	Supported
H3	The participants' perception of rainbow-washing negatively affects their attitude toward the ad.	Supported
H4	LGBTQ involvement moderates the perception of rainbow-washing.	Rejected
H4a	High LGTBQ involvement strengthens the perception of rainbow-washing after explicit queer ad exposure.	Rejected

H4b	High LGTBQ involvement weakens the perception of rainbow-washing after implicit queer ad exposure.	Rejected
H4c	Low LGTBQ involvement weakens the perception of rainbow-washing after heterosexual ad exposure.	Rejected

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1. Summary of findings

This study explored the following research question: *To what extent does the level of inclusion of LGBTQ themes in advertising impact consumer's attitude toward the brand, considering the mediating roles of rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward the ad, and the moderating role of LGBTQ involvement among Dutch Gen Z residents?*

Three types of ads were considered for this purpose: with explicit, implicit, and without any queer references. In addition, this research explored the different factors that contribute to the development of a brand attitudes, namely a mediating effect of rainbow-washing perception and ad attitude, and a moderating influence of one's LGBTQ involvement. The studied population was Gen Z Dutch residents, between the age of 20-27. The analyses reported a variety of interesting findings. Firstly, it was confirmed that the explicitness of queer ads affected the participants' brand attitudes, and that brands using both explicit and implicit queer ads are favoured over those employing heterosexual advertising. Interestingly, no statistical significance was reported in comparison between the two queer ads (implicit and explicit).

Secondly, findings revealed that the consumer's rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward ad mediate the participant attitude toward brand. As was expected, this study discovered that the recognition of rainbow-washing did adversely affect how individuals view an ad. Lastly, although one's LGBTQ involvement did not moderate how they perceive rainbow-washing, it found that specific types of ads were more likely to induce such perception over others.

5.2. Discussion

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, several reports identified various types of queer advertising, based on the degree of explicitness of queer themes and references in the ads (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 428; Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). Studies noted the importance of such distinction, as each type can elicit different reactions in the consumers (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 432; Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). Most consistently, it was found that brands which incorporate explicit LGBTQ themes in their ads tend to evoke negative attitudes, and brands using implicit queer advertising are favoured (Oakenfull & Grenlee, 2005, p. 428; Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). This can be explained with the theory of indirect persuasion, based on which relying on subtle communication is more likely to result in positive attitudes of the message recipients (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17).

When comparing a queer ad with an ad with no LGBTQ references, CSR research served as a theoretical guide. According to this theory, brands that do not include diversity representation, that LGBTQ exemplifies, are expected to be disliked (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2019, p. 415), unless the CSR initiatives are communicated too explicitly (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). This research tested such claims in the context of explicit and implicit queer advertising, by comparing it with a non-LGBTQ ad, and delivered various results.

Firstly, it was confirmed that the explicitness of queer ads did affect the consumer's attitude toward the brand. However, only a juxtaposition between a brand with an implicit queer ad, which was favoured over the one with a heterosexual couple aligned with the expected results. This particular finding is consistent with past studies illustrating the consumer's appreciation of brands which contribute to societally relevant topics via CSR (Tingchi Liu et al., 2014, p. 188; Kuokkanen & Sun, 2019, p. 413; Wilkie et al., 2023, p. 721). Previous literature associated this preference to many reasons. Fundamentally, because such brands promote diverse initiatives (Wilkie et al., 2023, p. 721) and thus, elevate the visibility of minorities (Wolowic et al., 2016, p. 557). By doing so, brands are capable of advancing societal changes towards a higher degree of inclusivity (Ruggs, et al., 2018, p. 331). This research further amplifies the importance of CSR communication for consumers, and confirms that its significance also extends to queer advertising. Specifically, it depicts that the generation of young adult consumers in their 20s highly value diverse representation.

Furthermore, the predictions surrounding the explicit LGBTQ advertising were unexpectedly disproven. Contrary to expectations that the brand attitude of this ad type would be the least favoured by comparison, the results proved otherwise. Based on the theory of indirect persuasion, suggestive advertising is more effective in eliciting positive consumer perception rather than the more overt and straightforward one (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17). This is due to its allowance for interpretive flexibility, and lack of constraint placed on the understanding of the message (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005, p. 17). This was expected to be duplicated in a preference for implicit rather than explicit queer advertising, however this research disproved that. There was no significance indicating a difference in brand attitudes between implicit and explicit queer advertising. This is a surprising finding, considering previous academic literature displays such preference in many studies on the reception of various levels of queer themes' inclusion (Um, 2016, p. 463; Champlin & Li, 2020, p. 171). In addition to this, explicit queer ads were also anticipated to be disliked in comparison to heterosexual ads with no queer references. This was expected to occur based on the existing research demonstrating that if CSR communication is presented too intensely, it dissuades the

consumers (Viererbl & Koch, 2022, p. 6). However, this research reported that brand attitude of an explicit queer ad remained favoured over the one of with no LGBTQ representation. Such finding further emphasises that diverse representation is universally preferred among young consumers.

Another focal point of this research regarded exploring the mediating effects of rainbow-washing and attitude toward ad on consumers' attitude toward brand. Rainbow-washing has become a notorious phenomenon in advertising, as well as in the academia studying its repercussions (Rice, 2022, p. 291; Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Many studies accentuate its wrongdoing from the societal angle, as well as its detrimental influence on consumer perception (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1436; Rice, 2022, p. 291). To reiterate, rainbow-washing stands for ingenuine use of LGBTQ references by brands (Rice, 2022, p. 291). Instead of honest allyship and advocacy for the minority, their goal is to appeal to the public and increase their profits (Rice, 2022, p. 291; Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Scholars found that rainbow-washing can cause serious distrust and adversity towards ads implementing it (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1436). This study tested this claim with the Gen Z residents of the Netherlands, and was able to confirm it. The respondents' perception of rainbow-washing did negatively influence their attitude toward the ad. Therefore, if the ad is seen as exaggerated in its LGBTQ support, omitting important information on its allyship, and using images and text to merely pretend its advocacy for the queer community, it can strongly deter the consumers. Although expected, this finding is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it evidences that consumers are aware of the rainbow-washing technique, and are capable of detecting it. Secondly, such results demonstrate the extent to which rainbow-washing can adversely affect one's attitude toward the ad that adopts it. As mentioned in the theoretical framework chapter, rainbow-washing falls under the theoretical concept of corporate hypocrisy, as it signifies performing insincere and deceitful actions by companies (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 79). Past research applied this to CSR communication, which queer advertising exemplifies, and evidenced its detrimental effect on consumer perception (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83; Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1436). Although the existing studies focused on different populations, namely German and American (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1439; Johns et al., 2022, p. 9), this research confirmed that the negative influence of rainbow-washing on ad attitude is universally transferrable, and also applies to Dutch residents. Specifically, it illustrates the importance of genuine queer representation and support that does not fall under rainbow-washing.

In addition to exploring the effect of rainbow-washing on ad attitude, this study also explored the chained reaction of attitude toward ad (Aad) on attitude toward brand (Ab). The

determinative relationship has been widely recognised in the academia (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 48, 52). It is well-established that how a consumer perceives an ad also reflects how they view the ad's brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981, p. 330; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 61). Although the body of literature supporting the Aad on Ab influence is extensive, little has been done to explore this from queer advertising's perspective (Um, 2014, p. 882). Consequently, testing this theory and its applicability to ads featuring LGBTQ themes was one of the prime points of this research. The findings were consistent with the previous literature, and showed that if an ad instils negative attitudes in consumers, they correspondingly demonstrate poor attitudes toward the advertised brand.

All in all, the results of this research investigating the mediation of rainbow-washing and ad attitude contributed to the academic field of advertising and consumer perception in the following ways. Firstly, they demonstrated that the previous theoretical frameworks, which were predominantly applied to general communication studies, are also relevant for the more niche category of LGBTQ campaigns. This study also facilitated better understanding of the different factors that influence how consumers form attitudes towards the brands which utilise queer themes. Particularly it uncovered the complexity of consumer attitudes by highlighting a full serial mediation of rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward ad, jointly influencing one's brand attitude.

The final factor which was considered to affect the formation of consumer's attitude toward the brand using queer advertising was one's LGBTQ involvement. This consisted of the extent to which the participants value, support, and are willing to take action to advocate for the queer community. Depending on the level of one's involvement, consumers were predicted to be detecting rainbow-washing differently in each type of ad. The prediction of LGBTQ involvement's moderating effect was based on the Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) ELM theory (p. 11). It was expected that those more involved would follow the central route of persuasion, and therefore process the ad more thoroughly and recognise rainbow-washing, as opposed to those less involved, not identifying it as accurately. However, this research revealed no moderation effect, and one's involvement with the queer community did not steer the participant's rainbow-washing perception. Although past literature reported that one's involvement moderated queer ad attitudes (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1446), this study indicated that the same moderation does not appear in relation to rainbow-washing. Therefore, even though the ELM theory is universally acclaimed, the current research was unable to extend its use to queer advertising. Contrary to expectations, the distinction between central and peripheral routes of processing an advertised message did not align with one's LGBTQ

involvement moderating rainbow-washing perception. Despite the involvement not having such an effect, this research uncovered an interesting finding about the studied population. Although merely 20% of the participants identified as non-heterosexual, the score of their overall involvement in the community was rather high. This, combined with the previously mentioned preference of brands including queer themes over those that do not, provides insight into some of the participants' characteristics. It shows that, firstly, modern consumers support and advocate for LGBTQ rights, and secondly, that they value brands that similarly express allyship with the community through their advertising.

While the moderating effect of the LGBTQ involvement was not detected, the analysis uncovered an interesting finding regarding the ad type evoking different levels of rainbow-washing. It was discovered that rainbow-washing was predominantly identified in the explicit ad, which resembled a limited edition, Pride Month campaign. This aligned with the previous findings indicating that the Pride Month ads are most likely to trigger rainbow-washing responses due to their limited, and often superficial queer advocacy (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Interestingly, as the manipulation check revealed, most respondents correctly identified the ad as a Pride Month campaign, but there was a minor difference between those recalling the ad was a limited Pride Month edition (47.3% of participants), and those not remembering that aspect (43.6%). This suggests that the highly explicit queer references alone substantially instil rainbow-washing perceptions, regardless of whether it was also recognised that the ad was a limited edition. Unsurprisingly, the heterosexual ad presented to the control group resulted in the lowest degree of rainbow-washing. Such findings demonstrate that the more explicit queer references are, the more rainbow-washing they evoke.

To conclude, this study sought the answer to the following question: *To what extent does the level of inclusion of LGBTQ themes in advertising impact consumer's attitude toward the brand, considering the mediating roles of rainbow-washing perception and attitude toward the ad, and the moderating role of LGBTQ involvement among Dutch Gen Z residents?* The results confirm that the level of inclusion of LGBTQ themes has a strong effect on the consumer's brand attitudes. Advertisements lacking the diverse representation of the LGBTQ community elicit the most disliked brand attitudes, compared to those that do incorporate queer references. Furthermore, both rainbow-washing perception and ad attitude participate in a serial mediation that alike contribute to the development of brand attitudes. Interestingly, their indirect effect can account for a large proportion of the change in how a consumer views a brand. Lastly, one's LGBTQ involvement was not found to have a moderating effect in the studied process of perceiving rainbow-washing.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for further research

This research demonstrated that the process of developing attitude toward brand of companies incorporating queer advertising is very complex, and can be influenced by various factors, such as their rainbow-washing or attitude toward the ad. Nonetheless, this study also bears its limitations, which could be improved in further research.

Firstly, the stimulus was AI generated, which could have affected the participants' responses, as it could have not been realistic enough (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1450). Opting for content that was not AI generated, but more closely resembled a professional marketing campaign, featuring real people could be useful to explore in future studies. Furthermore, past research indicates the potential issues stemming from using an unknown, or fictitious brand, as it can prevent applying the study's findings to the popular brands (Wulf et al., 2022, p. 1450). Although this was deliberate, to avoid any preconceived notions a participant may have about an established brand, comparing the consumer attitudes to queer advertising of a known vs. unknown brand could be an interesting area for future work.

Secondly, prior to being exposed to the stimulus, respondents were shown a disclaimer asking them to pay attention to the ad, as they would not be able to see it again. Such information, and one's inability to return to the ad would not be presented in a natural setting, which could have impaired the external validity of the study (Mallinson, 2019, p. 3).

Thirdly, although the sample was relatively heterogonous in terms of age and nationalities, the majority of participants were heterosexual women. Its size was as well limited, which could prohibit the generalisability of the study. Exploring the perception of a larger sample in future research could improve the generalisability of findings. This involves including more participants who are members of the LGBTQ community, and more male and non-binary individuals.

Furthermore, although LGBTQ involvement did not moderate the rainbow-washing perception, scholars should be aware that there might be other variables that could be playing a part. Therefore, exploring this angle further could be a fruitful area for future work.

Finally, despite its many advantages, the form of an online experiment could also lead to certain constraints. Namely, the conditions of an online experiment are meticulously arranged, which could impact their ecological validity and thus their generalisability to more naturally occurring environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 516). Moreover, the researcher had no control over the conditions during which the participants took the experiment. Therefore, there could have been distractions influencing the subjects' responses.

5.4. Practical implications

Multiple practical implications can be gathered from the results of this research that can be informative for brands and their advertising strategies. Most fundamentally, the discovered findings highlight the importance of diverse representations. They demonstrate that modern, young adult consumers value brands that incorporate LGBTQ themes more than those that do not. It was also discovered that the investigated population reported high level of LGBTQ involvement, even though the vast majority of them were not members of the community. Both findings can be of use to brands, as they can benefit from displaying more inclusivity in their advertising. Incorporating such themes, and partaking in queer advertising, can therefore improve the brand attitudes in their consumers, and can help them better target specifically the Gen Z population.

Nonetheless, marketers should remain aware of the risks of rainbow-washing. Although there was no difference in brand attitudes between the explicit and implicit queer advertising, the former was more at risk of eliciting rainbow-washing perceptions. This is noteworthy for advertisers for many reasons. Firstly, they ought to avoid rainbow-washing and ingenuine LGBTQ support, and not treat it as a marketing technique (Rusch, 2023, p. 2). Secondly, because if the consumers detect an advertisement to be rainbow-washing, it can negatively influence one's attitude toward ad, and consequently, their attitude toward brand. As previously mentioned, such caution should be mainly exercised with explicit ads, and Pride Month campaigns.

Overall, this research can provide some insight for marketers regarding the different factors that contribute to forming a consumer's attitude toward a brand, and which elements they should consider, when trying to appeal to young consumers.

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Appendix A. Stimulus

A1 Explicit queer ad



A2 Implicit queer ad



A3 Heterosexual ad (for the control group)



Appendix B. Questionnaire

Dear participant,

My name is Izabela Aniol and I conduct research for the Erasmus University Rotterdam on how consumers perceive brand's advertising. You are asked to participate, because your opinion can shed more light on this topic.

If you choose to participate, you will take part in an online questionnaire, which takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can stop at any time without providing any explanation. No risks or discomforts are expected while participating in this study.

All collected information will be used in anonymised form, and no personal questions will be asked. Your privacy is secured. The answers you provide will be used solely for the purposes of a Master's thesis.

If you have any questions about the study, or would like to know more about the results of this research, please contact me.

Izabela Aniol 653416ia@eur.nl

PS: Users of the research platform SurveyCircle.com will receive SurveyCircle points for their participation.

Please check the appropriate box below.

- I consent to participate in this research, and to the collection, use, and retention of the data I will share.
- I do not consent to this research.

What is your age? Please type in below using numbers

Do you live in The Netherlands?

Yes

No

You will now see an advertisement, followed by a questionnaire. Please take a good look at the ad, as you will not be able to go back and see it again.

AD

How did the **ad** make you feel?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cheerful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pleased	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Insulted	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Irritated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Repulsed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

I am
willing to
spend
more
money on
products if
companies
are
committed
to the
LGBTQ
community

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other, please specify _____
- Prefer not to say

What is your nationality? Please select from the list below

Nationality

▼ Afghan ... Zimbabwean

What is the highest level of education you obtained?

- Primary education
- Secondary education
- Bachelor's or equivalent
- Master's or equivalent
- Doctoral or equivalent
- Other

What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Asexual
- Queer
- Other - please specify _____
- Prefer not to say

What was the advertised product in the ad you saw?

- Chewing gum
- Chocolate bar
- Gummy bears
- I don't remember

Who was in the ad?

- A heterosexual couple in a regular setting
- A homosexual couple in a regular setting
- A homosexual couple in a Pride Month inspired setting
- I don't remember

Was the ad a limited Pride Month collection?

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember

You have reached the end of this questionnaire. **Please move to the next page to record your responses.** Thank you for your participation, your answers are very valuable for this research.

This research investigates how the inclusion of various levels of queer themes affects brand perception. It is evaluated via the respondent's ad and rainbow-washing perception. The

former regards brand's inauthentic support of the LGBTQ community. If you'd like to know more about this research, or if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me via e-mail: 653416ia@eur.nl

Ads used for this research are AI generated, and the brand is fictitious. All ads used for this research are shown below.

Appendix C. ChatGPT prompts for generating the ads

C1 Prompt for generating the implicit queer ad:

“Generate an advertisement featuring a homosexual couple of two men affectionately sharing a 'Swirl' chocolate bar on a couch in their apartment with a coffee table in front of them. The chocolate bar's wrapping is blue with the logo in white, and the atmosphere captures a close and shared moment.”

C2 Prompt for generating the explicit queer ad:

“Generate a very similar advertisement to the one before, featuring a homosexual couple of two men affectionately sharing a 'Swirl' chocolate bar on a couch in their apartment with a coffee table in front of them. The chocolate bar's wrapping is blue with the logo in white, and the atmosphere captures a close and shared moment. However, include many Pride and LGBTQ elements around them, such as colourful rainbow flags and rainbow images.”

C3 Prompt for generating the heterosexual ad:

“Generate an advertisement featuring a heterosexual couple affectionately sharing a 'Swirl' chocolate bar on a couch in their apartment with a coffee table in front of them. The chocolate bar's wrapping is blue with the logo in white, and the atmosphere captures a close and shared moment.”

Appendix D. Declaration of AI use

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Izabela Aniol

Student ID: 653416

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Freya De Keyzer

Date: 27th June 2024

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative

AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

Izabela Amiół

Date of Signature: 27th June 2024