

# **How Implicit Should Fashion Brand Retailers Advertise to Stigmatized Consumer Groups?**

Haryani Primanti, Arnold Japutra\* & Ni Made Asti Aksari

## ***Abstract***

*Purpose* – Marketing efforts toward stigmatized subculture groups are a very intriguing practice, as there is a risk of losing consumers from the majority group. Implicit advertisement is a discreet communication strategy that enables a marketer to communicate with certain subculture groups using symbols to avoid negative responses from other consumer groups. This study aims to determine the effect of implicit advertisement on brand attitudes among gay consumers in an unfriendly and friendly market.

*Design/Methodology/Approach* – This study employed a between-subjects experimental design where two experiments were conducted. The first study recruited gay men in Indonesia – an unfriendly market, whereas the second study recruited gay men in the Netherlands – a friendly market.

*Findings* – The result reveals that implicit advertisements significantly influence brand attitude. As expected, in an unfriendly market, a higher level of implicitness results in a more positive brand attitude. Surprisingly, the friendly market also prefers a high level of ad implicitness.

*Originality/Value* – This is the first manuscript to examine how to advertise to gay men in friendly and unfriendly markets. Particularly, this study investigates the impact of three implicit gay advertisements (low implicit, moderately implicit, and highly implicit ads) on gay consumers' brand attitudes.

**Keywords:** *implicit marketing, minority marketing, implicit advertisement, gay advertisement, brand attitude, fashion brand retailers*

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We declare that there is no conflicts of interest attached with this manuscript.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical reasons.

### **Ethics Approval Statement**

All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. Approval was obtained from the local ethics committee.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Statista (2023a), the global fashion industry generated approximately 1.73 trillion U.S. dollars in revenue in 2023 and is projected to grow by over 250 billion dollars by 2028, indicating rising demand. In a rapidly evolving market with increasing competition, fashion retailers must adopt effective marketing strategies to stay competitive. Advertising remains a key strategy, with substantial budgets allocated to campaigns. For instance, in 2021, the U.S. clothing industry spent nearly 1.23 billion U.S. dollars on static display advertising—a 60% increase from 765.3 million in 2020 (Statista, 2023b).

Effective advertising can create and sustain demand (Zheng et al., 2013), stimulate consumption, and expand market share (Sun et al., 2020). Septianto et al. (2023) found that ad design influences customer attitudes, with illustrations significantly boosting willingness to try products. Emotional appeals also enhance purchase intentions (Japutra et al., 2022). However, capturing audience attention remains challenging (Nguyen et al., 2020), with 60% of viewers unable to recall ads they've seen (Sharp & Romaniuk, 2016). This suggests much of the advertising fails to reach its audience (Nguyen et al., 2020), especially niche segments like LGBT consumers.

The LGBT market is highly profitable, with a spending power of USD 3.7 trillion (Pride World Media, 2018). They are often viewed as fashion trendsetters, a key segment due to their purchasing power (Rodriguez, 2023). Among them, gay men spend significantly on fashion (Li et al., 2023) and demonstrate greater brand loyalty than heterosexual consumers (Isin, 2012). While targeting this market offers substantial potential, effective strategies across diverse markets remain underexplored.

Reaching the LGBT audience requires careful planning and carries high risk, as targeting this group is often seen as cautionary rather than progressive (Cheah et al., 2021). Heterosexual consumers may react negatively to advertisements featuring gay culture, and

acceptance of homosexuality varies across societies. This has led to the term ‘gay-friendly’ market—denoting environments supportive of the LGBT community. For example, the Netherlands represents a friendly market with legal protection of LGBT rights, whereas Indonesia, an unfriendly market, criminalizes same-sex activity and exhibits high resistance.

Even in friendly markets, explicit gay-themed ads featuring same-sex couples can provoke backlash or boycotts (Um et al., 2016), prompting brands like Subaru and Vodka to use implicit advertising—subtle cues such as symbols or icons without showing couples (Choong et al., 2019). These implicit elements elicit varied interpretations and responses. Studies show that implicit ads generate more favorable attitudes from heterosexual consumers than explicit ones (Um, 2016). However, the optimal level of implicitness in gay-themed fashion advertising remains unclear.

Few studies have explored effective advertising strategies targeting gay men in friendly markets. Existing research has examined the impact of explicit ads on brand attitudes (Hooten et al., 2009) and implicit ads on consumer responses (Oakenfull et al., 2008), but little attention has been given to how varying degrees of implicitness shape brand attitudes. This study addresses this gap by examining the effects of three implicit ad types—low, moderate, and high—on gay consumers’ brand attitudes. A low implicit ad features both a gay icon (e.g., a gay man) and a symbol (e.g., a rainbow flag), a moderate ad shows only the icon, and a high implicit ad includes only the symbol. These differ in how overtly they communicate homosexuality, with high implicit ads being the most subtle.

Additionally, while prior research has focused on gay consumers in friendly markets, their attitudes in unfriendly markets remain unexplored. Therefore, this study investigates gay consumers’ brand attitudes in both a friendly market (the Netherlands) and an unfriendly one (Indonesia), where LGBT resistance is high.

## **2. Literature Review**

Research on gay-themed advertising has examined its effects on brand attitude (Cheah et al., 2021), ad attitude (Oakenfull et al., 2008), and purchase intention (Um, 2016). Findings suggest that ads using homosexual symbols—rather than explicit depictions—appeal to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences (e.g., Puntoni, 2011). Tolerance toward homosexuality is pivotal: greater tolerance correlates with more positive responses and higher purchase intent (Frankel & Ha, 2020; Polkinghorne et al., 2022). Yet little is known about gay consumers' reactions to different degrees of implicitness in such ads. This study investigates attitudes toward varying levels of implicit gay advertising in two contrasting markets—one highly tolerant (friendly) and one low-tolerant (unfriendly) toward homosexuality.

### **2.1. Social Identity Theory and Self-Verification Theory**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a theoretical foundation for this research. SIT explains how social group memberships influence self-concept and behavior (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). It posits that identity comprises both personal identity (one's sense of self) and social identity (the self within group contexts) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When social identity is salient, individuals interpret the world through that lens, seeking alignment with their group (Malär et al., 2011). They categorize others as in-group or out-group members (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), and these social group affiliations, including those around brands, form part of their felt identity. Group membership also helps communicate identity to others (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

People are motivated to maintain positive self-worth, often by adopting consumption choices of associative groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) or rejecting those of dissociative groups (White & Argo, 2009). Beyond social validation, consumers seek self-concept alignment. They choose brands that affirm their self-identity, driven by self-verification or self-

enhancement motives (Gao et al., 2009). Self-Verification Theory (SVT) proposes that individuals seek to confirm their identity through consumption, integrating brand meanings into their self-concept (Purzycki & Lang, 2019). When a brand aligns with their self-perception, consumers are motivated by self-verification (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In contrast, self-enhancement drives consumers to choose brands that elevate their ideal self-image (Gaustad et al., 2019). Thus, self-verification aligns with the actual self, while self-enhancement aligns with the ideal self (Japutra et al., 2019).

For gay men, the self-verification motive may be especially salient, as they seek to express their true selves. Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Verification Theory (SVT) help explain responses to gay-themed ads: SIT emphasizes group identity (LGBT community), while SVT focuses on affirming one's self-view for psychological consistency (Swann, 2012). Research shows that social group membership shapes responses to advertising (Aaker et al., 2000), with individuals responding more positively to brands that affirm their identity, especially when that identity is salient (Turner et al., 1987). In this context, homosexual imagery can strengthen brand–community ties. In unfriendly markets, SIT suggests gay men may see their identity as stigmatized, leading to conformity pressure.

Past research has indicated that gay consumers have a positive response to advertising with homosexual imagery (Bond & Farrel, 2020) and tend to select products that are symbolically aligned with their self-concept (Oakenfull, 2012). Further, gay consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions toward a brand increase when the brand shows LGBT-friendly practices (Ro & Khan, 2022). This is because they consider the brand to conduct brand activism, which refers to the extent to which a brand engages in public speech or actions on partisan sociopolitical matters, supporting their groups (Ahmad et al., 2023). On the other hand, consumers are skeptical of brands that do not conduct authentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). According to these authors, these brands are conducting woke washing – presenting



brand activism messaging inauthentically without aligned prosocial purpose, values, and practices.

From the SVT perspective, gay men may seek validation of their authentic selves within their community but prefer implicit symbols recognizable only to them. This allows them to navigate societal pressures (SIT) while fulfilling their need for identity affirmation (SVT). Highly implicit ads thus offer a safe way to engage with brands without risking social stigma, supporting both positive social identity and self-verification. In contrast, in friendly markets where LGBT rights are widely accepted and gay identity is normalized, gay men may prefer more explicit ads that clearly acknowledge their identity and signal in-group recognition.

## **2.2. Hypothesis Development**

In an unfriendly market like Indonesia, where LGBT rights are neither recognized nor protected, resistance toward homosexuality remains high, making gay identity a negative social identity. According to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals belonging to stigmatized groups often adopt strategies to improve their perceived social status. One such strategy is shifting self-categorization to a broader, more socially accepted identity (Mummendey et al., 1999). Rather than identifying primarily as gay, individuals may emphasize identities such as being a professional, sports enthusiast, or consumer of mainstream brands (Zhang et al., 2021), allowing them to avoid stigma while preserving non-discriminated aspects of their identity (Thoma et al., 2021).

SVT (Swann, 2012) posits that individuals seek confirmation of their self-views to maintain psychological consistency and social stability. In unfriendly markets, gay men may anticipate negative societal reactions if their identity is visible. To avoid conflict, they engage in identity management, presenting themselves in socially acceptable ways (Swann et al., 2003). Highly implicit ads subtly communicate LGBT cues without making them explicit, allowing

gay consumers to verify their identity privately while avoiding societal rejection. Research shows that covert marketing strategies effectively influence consumer behavior by tapping into social dynamics and emotional responses—particularly relevant where consumers may feel vulnerable (Evans & Wojdyski, 2020). Implicit cues can foster a sense of recognition and belonging without provoking backlash (Cheng et al., 2022).

SVT also suggests that perceived misalignment between self-perception and societal perception causes psychological discomfort (Swann et al., 2003). In such contexts, explicit LGBT advertising may intensify marginalization, creating dissonance between private identity and social perception (Cheng et al., 2022). In contrast, highly implicit ads help preserve both personal and social identity stability, encouraging a more favorable brand attitude.

In unfriendly markets, where gay consumers of sports shoes are stigmatized, they may prefer to be seen simply as sports shoe consumers rather than as homosexual. Highly implicit ads are more appealing as they allow engagement with a brand without public identification with a stigmatized group. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: In an unfriendly market, highly implicit ads are likely to result in more positive brand attitudes among gay men than moderately implicit ads.

H1b: In an unfriendly market, highly implicit ads are likely to result in more positive brand attitudes among gay men than low implicit ads.

Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) found that U.S. gay men favor ads explicitly depicting homosexuals, and emotions evoked by such ads shape attitudes toward both ad and brand (Bhat et al., 1998). SVT (Swann, 2012) holds that people seek alignment between their actual self and how others perceive them. In friendly markets, homosexuality is accepted, so gay men need not hide their identity (Tan et al., 2020); they expect brands to acknowledge them as they

see themselves (Hajek, 2017). Low-implicit ads achieve this by recognizing LGBT identity without making it the sole focus (Choong et al., 2019). Highly implicit ads, being too subtle, fail to reinforce the actual self and weaken brand connections (Hajek, 2017).

SIT further suggests that group salience shapes ad responses (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Where LGBT identity is celebrated, individuals seek clear yet natural group representations (Kang & Ro, 2024); ads that are overly implicit feel less affirming (Burgess et al., 2022). Hence, we hypothesize:

H2a: In a friendly market, low implicit ads are likely to result in more positive brand attitudes among gay men than moderately implicit ads.

H2b: In a friendly market, low implicit ads are likely to result in more positive brand attitudes among gay men than high implicit ads.

### **3. Overview of the Studies**

Two experimental studies and one qualitative study were conducted to test the hypotheses. Study 1 investigated how ad implicitness affects brand attitude in an unfriendly market (H1a and H1b). Study 2a examined the same relationship in a friendly market (H2a and H2b), while Study 2b, a qualitative study, offered deeper insights into the findings of Study 2a.

Both Study 1 and Study 2a manipulated ad implicitness at three levels: low, moderate, and high, using different gay icons and symbols. Study 1 used a single-factor, three-level (low vs. moderate vs. high implicit ads) between-subjects experimental design. Study 2a replicated this design in a friendly market. Study 2b involved interviews with three participants to further interpret Study 2a's findings.

## 4. Study 1

Study 1 tests H1a and H1b by examining gay men's brand attitudes toward three levels of ad implicitness in an unfriendly market (Indonesia).

### 4.1. Methods

**Participants and Design.** A total of 178 gay men in Indonesia participated in Study 1. Among them, 73.3% were aged 18-24, 21.6% were 25-34, and 5.1% were 35-44. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, relying on referrals from gay individuals to reach hard-to-identify respondents. They were divided into three groups based on ad implicitness: 60 viewed a low implicit ad, 60 a moderately implicit ad, and 58 a highly implicit ad.

The sample size was adequate for detecting medium-to-large effects based on Cohen's (1988) power analysis guidelines. Although the power level was slightly below the conventional 0.80 standard, it remained acceptable for identifying meaningful differences across conditions. According to Cohen (1988), medium-to-large effect sizes are practically significant, indicating that differences in brand attitudes across ad types likely reflect substantive variations. Similar sample sizes have been used in previous studies on LGBT advertising effects (e.g., Åkestam et al., 2017), supporting the methodological consistency of this approach.

Brand attitude, the dependent variable, was measured using a 1-to-7 semantic differential scale with five items: *unappealing/appealing*, *bad/good*, *unpleasant/pleasant*, *unfavorable/favorable*, and *unlikeable/likable*. Manipulation was checked by asking 'Based on the above advertisement, which group of consumer segment would you think the advertisement is targeting?'.

**Procedure.** Researchers used three types of advertising stimuli: low implicit, moderately implicit, and highly implicit ads. A pre-test in Indonesia and the Netherlands identified Nike shoes as the product, as it is a globally recognized brand perceived as gender-

neutral/heterosexual in both countries. To design the ads, six gay men from both countries were interviewed to identify gay icons and symbols. They highlighted common gay physical traits—good posture, a cute face, neat trendy hair (thicker on top, thinner on sides), a thin beard, fitted clothing, earrings, and tattoos. These features shaped the gay icon in the ads. For gay symbols, the rainbow flag and double Mars symbol were chosen as most recognizable and incorporated. The phrase “come out” was selected as the ad tagline, being the most familiar gay-related term among participants.

Implicit gay advertisements were classified into three categories based on Pierce’s semantic triangle (Akpan et al., 2013): icon, index, and symbol. Icons are explicit signs like images; indexes have a direct relationship to what they represent (e.g., smoke to fire); symbols have no direct relationship and rely on social agreement. The study excluded indexes due to ambiguity in homosexual signs.

A low implicit ad includes both gay icons and symbols, making it the least subtle. A moderately implicit ad contains only gay icons, and a highly implicit ad contains only gay symbols, which require socialization to recognize and are thus the most subtle.

The low implicit ad showed a gay male (without a partner) with identifiable gay physical traits plus gay symbols like the rainbow flag. The moderately implicit ad showed only the gay male with gay icon features, without symbols. The highly implicit ad displayed only gay symbols (e.g., LGBT jargon, subtle rainbow backgrounds) without any gay icon.

An online questionnaire on Qualtrics was used, which randomized participants into one of the three ad groups. The questionnaire included nine parts: opening, brand familiarity and usage, exposure to a neutral reference ad, dependent variable measurement, exposure to one implicit gay ad, dependent variable measurement, manipulation check, and demographic data.

A pre-test was conducted with 56 male students—21 from Indonesia and 35 from the Netherlands—to (1) assess whether the questionnaire and implicit ad stimuli were clearly

understood across both cultures, and (2) test the validity and reliability of the instruments. The questionnaire, identical in wording for Study 1 and Study 2, was administered in English. At the end, participants were asked, “Who do you think this advertisement is targeting?” and “Would this ad be acceptable or relatable in your country?”

Results showed some participants correctly identified the ads as targeting gay audiences, with higher recognition in the low implicit condition. Most participants found the ads acceptable in their country. Validity and reliability tests were satisfactory. After the pre-test, a prompt was added asking participants to describe the implicit ad in five words to enhance stimulus recall and engagement with the material.

## 4.2. Results

**Manipulation checks.** Through a paired sample t-test, we found a significant difference in brand attitude before and after the participants were exposed to the low implicit gay ad ( $M_{\text{Before}} = 5.38$ ;  $M_{\text{After}} = 4.96$ ;  $p = .005$ ). A significant difference was also found in participants’ brand attitudes before and after seeing the highly implicit ad ( $M_{\text{Before}} = 4.95$ ;  $M_{\text{After}} = 6.01$ ;  $p = .000$ ), and no differences were found in participants’ brand attitudes before and after seeing the moderately implicit ad ( $M_{\text{Before}} = 5.83$ ;  $M_{\text{After}} = 5.51$ ;  $p = .530$ ). Therefore, the manipulation of messages on the implicitness of the homosexual sign in the ad had a successful effect on the participants.

More participants recognized the low implicit ad as targeting gays than the moderately implicit ad. Similarly, more participants identified the moderately implicit ad as a gay commercial than the highly implicit ad. This confirms that the manipulation of implicit gay imagery in the ads was effective.

**Brand Attitude.** To test H1a, an ANOVA test was conducted, and the results revealed a significant main effect of implicit gay ads ( $F_{(2,344)} = 3.69, p < 0.050$ ). Brand familiarity had no effect on participants' brand attitude ( $F_{(1,344)} = .044, p > 0.050$ ). Brand usage also had no effect on participants' brand attitude ( $F_{(1,344)} = 1.84, p > 0.050$ ). The results of data processing are presented in Table 1. Brand attitudes differed significantly among gay participants exposed to the low, moderate, and high implicit ads ( $M_{\text{low}} = 4.96; M_{\text{medium}} = 5.51; M_{\text{high}} = 6.01, p = .000$ ). Table 1 shows the detailed mean differences between groups.

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 2 shows that participants exposed to highly implicit ads had a more positive brand attitude than those who saw moderately implicit ads ( $M_{\text{high}} = 6.01, M_{\text{med}} = 5.51, p = .012$ ), supporting H1a.

TABLE 2 HERE

In an unfriendly market, gay men responded more positively to highly implicit ads than to moderately implicit ads. Similarly, participants who viewed highly implicit ads had a more positive brand attitude than those who saw low implicit ads ( $M_{\text{high}} = 6.01, M_{\text{low}} = 4.96, p = .000$ ), supporting H1b.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 shows that greater implicitness of homosexual cues leads to more favorable brand attitudes among gay consumers, with the highest brand attitudes observed among those exposed to highly implicit ads and the lowest among those exposed to low implicit ads.

## 5. Study 2a

Study 2a, replicating Study 1, tests H2a and H2b by examining gay men's brand attitudes toward three levels of ad implicitness in a friendly market (the Netherlands).

## 5.1. Methods

**Participants and Design.** A total of 178 gay men participated in Study 2. Among participants, 61.3% were aged 18-24, 16.9% were 25-34, 11.6% were 35-44, 6.6% were 45-54, and 3.6% were 55 or older. The younger demographic aligns with the target audience of the shoe advertisement used in the study. Participants were divided into three groups based on ad implicitness: 61 viewed a low-implicit ad, 60 a moderately implicit ad, and 58 a highly implicit ad.

**Procedure.** Study 2a followed the same procedural framework as Study 1 but introduced key elements that expanded the research objectives. First, it served as a cross-cultural extension, exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals in an inclusive environment perceive implicit branding compared to those in a marginalized setting. Second, it aimed to test the generalizability of findings, determining whether the preference for highly implicit ads in Indonesia would also hold in a progressive and accepting society. Rather than a direct replication, Study 2a functioned as an extension that tested the robustness of the implicitness effect across diverse cultural landscapes.

## 5.2. Results

**Manipulation checks.** Similar to Study 1, Study 2 used a paired-sample t-test and found significant changes in brand attitudes before and after exposure to the ads. Participants who viewed the low implicit ad had a lower brand attitude after exposure ( $M_{\text{before}} = 5.85$ ;  $M_{\text{after}} = 5.40$ ;  $p = .025$ ). In contrast, those who saw the moderately implicit ad developed a more positive brand attitude ( $M_{\text{before}} = 5.40$ ;  $M_{\text{after}} = 5.85$ ;  $p = .000$ ). The highly implicit ad had the strongest effect, with brand attitudes increasing significantly ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.76$ ;  $M_{\text{after}} = 6.79$ ;  $p = .000$ ). These results confirm the successful manipulation of the three ad types. Additionally, more participants recognized the low implicit ad as targeting gay men than the moderately implicit



ad, and more identified the moderately implicit ad as a gay commercial than the highly implicit ad.

**Brand Attitude.** The ANOVA test showed a significant main effect of implicit gay ads ( $F(2,350) = 4.549, p < 0.05$ ). Brand familiarity and brand usage were included as covariates in a retested model to confirm that both did not influence brand attitude. Results showed no significant effect of brand familiarity ( $F_{(1,350)} = .85, p > 0.050$ ) or brand usage ( $F_{(1,350)} = 1.76, p > 0.050$ ) on brand attitude. Table 3 presents the results, indicating significant differences in brand attitude among participants who viewed the low, moderate, and highly implicit ads ( $M_{\text{low}} = 5.40$ ;  $M_{\text{medium}} = 5.85$ ;  $M_{\text{high}} = 6.79$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Mean differences between groups are detailed in Table 3.

TABLE 3 HERE

Unlike in an unfriendly market (i.e., Indonesia), we initially expected that in friendly markets, more explicit homosexual symbols would lead to more positive brand attitudes among gay consumers. However, our results show the opposite. Table 4 indicates that participants exposed to the low implicit ad had a significantly lower brand attitude than those who saw the moderately implicit ad ( $M_{\text{low}} = 5.40$ ;  $M_{\text{medium}} = 5.85$ ;  $p = .077$ ), rejecting H2a. Similarly, participants who viewed the low implicit ad had a significantly lower brand attitude than those exposed to the highly implicit ad ( $M_{\text{low}} = 5.40$ ;  $M_{\text{high}} = 6.79, p = .000$ ), rejecting H2b.

TABLE 4 HERE

Figure 2 shows that participants who viewed the low implicit ad had the lowest brand attitude, while those who saw the moderately implicit ad had a higher brand attitude. The highly implicit ad generated the most positive brand attitude. This finding is particularly interesting as it contradicts our initial expectations.

FIGURE 2 HERE

## 6. Study 2b

Study 2b explored the unexpected results of Study 2a through an abductive qualitative approach (Kurtaligi et al., 2024). Interviews with three gay men from Study 2a revealed their preference for highly implicit ads. They explained that, given the Netherlands' high LGBT acceptance, homosexuality is no longer a subculture but part of mainstream culture, so subtle cues feel more natural.

“Here in Amsterdam — actually, the Netherlands in general — we don't really feel any different from anyone else. We don't look at people based on their sexual orientation. Unlike in the country you're from, being gay isn't a crime here. It's something that's celebrated. See those guys over there? (points to the table at the end of the bar where five guys are chatting) Some of them aren't even gay, but they come here (gay bar) often because of their gay friends. We're part of them and they're part of us.” (RN, 43 years old, entrepreneur)

Recent data shows that the Netherlands remains one of Europe's most accepting countries of homosexuality. A 2020 Williams Institute report ranks it among the top five globally (Flores, 2023), and a 2019 survey found that 66% of Dutch respondents felt free to be open about their sexual orientation—the highest in Europe (Statista, 2020). This strong acceptance suggests the gay community may no longer seek support through advertising, as their identity is well integrated into mainstream society.

Additionally, the abundance of ads targeting gay individuals has led to perceptions that such ads are less sincere. Brands explicitly showing support for gays are sometimes seen as exploiting the community for commercial gain.

“Honestly, the way ads are targeting the gay community now. It's a bit overwhelming sometimes. It's almost like they're everywhere, and it starts to feel less genuine. When

a brand goes out of its way to shout, “We support gay people!” it can sometimes come off as, well, exploiting us. It feels more like they’re just trying to cash in on our community for their own benefit.” (RR, 41 years old, restaurant manager)

Highly implicit ads are considered more sincere because they speak directly to gay men without overtly signaling to heterosexual consumers that the company is inclusive.

“Ads that are more subtle, where they’re just doing their thing and showing that they support gay people without screaming about it, they feel more real. It’s like they’re talking to us directly without needing to put a big rainbow flag in your face. They’re inclusive, but they don’t make it all about *being inclusive* — it’s just a part of who they are. That’s way more sincere to me.” (AN, 27 years old, post-graduate student)

Third, explicit gay ads are often viewed as ordinary and contribute to advertising clutter, making strategies with more implicit messages seem better and more engaging. Akdogan and Altuntas (2015) note that the rise in covert marketing is partly due to growing consumer skepticism and disinterest, which can lead to negative responses to direct marketing efforts.

## **7. General Discussion**

### **7.1. Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications**

Marginalized consumers are demanding brands to exhibit higher brand activism by increasing involvement in socio-politically issues, nevertheless, these consumers are also highly skeptical due to the underlying motives behind that activism (Ahmad et al., 2023). These consumers tend to be skeptical due to the misalignment between the brand’s actions and its proclaimed values (Francioni et al., 2025). Brands should be very careful in communicating their activism since it could be considered opportunistic actions. Not only marginalized

consumers, but non-marginalized consumers could also show negativity towards the brands. Cheah et al. (2021) display that not everyone can be receptive toward marginalized consumers and brands who exhibit activism to support them. These authors note that heterosexual males are less receptive compared to females. Thus, it is important for brands to understand how to communicate better and be more authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Our study shows that gay consumers' brand attitudes are significantly influenced by the implicitness of gay imagery in advertisements. Greater implicitness leads to more positive brand attitudes across both friendly and unfriendly markets, with lower brand attitudes observed for less implicit ads. Specifically, in the friendly market, there is no significant difference in brand attitudes among gay participants exposed to low versus moderately implicit ads. Previous research has shown that heterosexual consumers prefer implicit over explicit homosexual imagery in advertising (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull et al., 2008). This study extends these findings by demonstrating that homosexual consumers exhibit a similar preference, reinforcing the broader appeal of implicit LGBT representation in advertising. This study is also among the first to test implicit gay ads' impact on brand attitudes in unfriendly markets, as most previous studies were conducted in friendly markets. Figure 3 explains the reasons behind gay consumers' preference for highly implicit ads across different markets.

#### FIGURE 3 HERE

In unfriendly markets, gay men prefer highly implicit ads due to society's negative views of the LGBT community. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains that an inferior social identity leads to negative self-perception. In Indonesia, laws do not recognize or protect LGBT rights, and resistance to homosexuality remains high. A 2012 Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) survey found 80.6% of the population objected to having gay or lesbian neighbors ("Homophobia on the rise," 2012). A Pew Research Center survey (2022–2023) revealed 92% opposed same-sex marriage, with 88% strongly opposing it (Indra & Loasana,

2023). This societal rejection stigmatizes gay identity, reinforcing its negative perception. Individuals with a negative social identity may seek to improve self-perception by self-categorizing into a broader, higher-level identity (Mummendey et al., 1991; Zhang et al., 2021). In an unfriendly market, gay men prefer to be seen primarily as consumers of sports shoes rather than as homosexuals.

A notable finding is that in the friendly market, gay consumers' preferences are similar to those in the unfriendly market, contradicting our hypothesis. However, the reason differs. In inclusive societies like the Netherlands, where LGBT rights are well-protected, gay individuals no longer need advertising for identity affirmation (Franklin et al., 2020; Chaney et al., 2018). As homosexuality becomes integrated into mainstream culture, these consumers see themselves as part of a broader society—not a distinct subculture. Thus, explicit LGBT ads may feel forced, while implicit ones offer recognition without overemphasis (Akestam et al., 2017).

As gay men increasingly see themselves as part of mainstream culture, they prefer not to be defined by sexual orientation but by shared interests with the broader audience. This aligns with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), which posits that people seek a balance between belonging and uniqueness (Brewer & Roccas, 2001). When LGBT identity is widely accepted, the need for explicit differentiation fades. Rather than demanding special representation, gay individuals integrate into the broader cultural context. Highly implicit ads fulfill this balance—acknowledging identity subtly without making consumers feel targeted (Choong et al., 2019; Kang & Ro, 2024). In friendly markets, overt LGBT ads may backfire by overemphasizing an identity no longer needing affirmation.

The second reason for gay men's preference towards highly implicit ads in friendly markets is that the overwhelming number of advertisements explicitly targeting gay individuals has led to skepticism regarding their sincerity (Ahmad et al., 2023; Francioni et al., 2025). When brands overtly showcase support for the LGBT community, they are sometimes perceived as

exploiting the community for commercial gain rather than demonstrating genuine inclusivity. When LGBT representation in advertising is highly explicit, consumers may recognize it as a strategic marketing ploy rather than an authentic commitment to inclusivity, leading to resistance or disengagement (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). In highly progressive markets like the Netherlands, where LGBT identities are fully accepted, consumers are particularly attuned to corporate marketing tactics and may view overt inclusivity messaging as opportunistic. Highly implicit ads, on the other hand, are seen as more sincere and authentic because they subtly acknowledge LGBT consumers without overtly signaling to heterosexual audiences that the company is inclusive. Moreover, the massive highly explicit ads portraying gay might be the cause. Akestam et al. (2017) show that portrayals of homosexuality in advertising can enhance social connectedness and empathy. This means that repetitive ads portraying homosexuality might trigger desensitization among consumers. A meta-analysis also supports this contention by showing that presenting heteronormative imagery of LGBT identities is the reason for the desensitization of heterosexual consumers.

The third reason gay men in friendly markets prefer highly implicit ads is that explicit gay ads are often seen as ordinary advertisements contributing to clutter, reducing their effectiveness in capturing attention. As more brands include LGBT representation, overuse of explicit messaging leads to desensitization, making such ads appear repetitive and unremarkable. Research on advertising clutter (Ha & Litman, 1997) shows that excessive exposure to similar ads causes consumers to disengage and tune out. Thus, explicit LGBT ads may be viewed as just another commercial tactic rather than meaningful representation.

To counter this, advertisers are shifting toward implicit messaging, which is seen as more effective and engaging. Akdoğan & Altuntaş (2015) argue that covert marketing rises due to growing consumer skepticism and resistance to overt persuasion. Highly implicit ads break through clutter by offering subtle, intriguing messages that stand out, creating a sense of

exclusivity and authenticity appealing to consumers overwhelmed by explicit promotions.

Our surprising finding that gay men in friendly markets prefer highly implicit ads contrasts with Oakenfull and Greenlee's (2005) U.S. study, where gay men favored explicit ads. This difference suggests cultural and temporal factors shape LGBT consumer preferences. The 2005 study was conducted when LGBT visibility in advertising was emerging, and explicit representation was seen as progressive and affirming. Today, in markets like the Netherlands, LGBT inclusion is normalized, reducing the need for strong external validation through ads.

This research offers managerial implications for fashion retailers targeting the gay market. Brands should employ implicit advertising—using subtle symbols that align with self-identity—in both friendly and unfriendly markets. In unfriendly environments, subtle inclusion signals offer validation, fostering positive brand associations. In friendly markets, consumers prefer to be seen holistically, not solely through their sexual identity. Thus, brands should move from “inclusion” to “integration marketing”, naturally featuring LGBT individuals in mainstream contexts. For example, instead of a Pride-themed campaign targeting gay men explicitly, a luxury brand might depict a gay man (with subtle cues) traveling first-class, without focusing on sexual identity.

In increasingly inclusive societies, mainstream media and influencer marketing can benefit from adopting highly implicit approaches when representing LGBT individuals. Instead of overtly highlighting sexual orientation—which may seem performative or exploitative—brands can feature gay influencers in campaigns focused on shared values like creativity, ambition, or self-expression, without emphasizing sexuality. This fosters greater authenticity and relatability among diverse audiences.

This research also offers important implications for advertising regulators and CSR managers to ensure ads targeting the gay market do not reinforce stereotypes or cause social harm. In unfriendly markets, regulators may not support LGBT-related advertising, but CSR

programs can promote practices that protect vulnerable groups and encourage diversity through thoughtful, context-sensitive content. In friendly markets, regulators should encourage nuanced, inclusive representations that avoid reducing individuals to their sexual identity. Advertising oversight bodies might develop checklists or review mechanisms assessing not only diversity presence but also the quality and depth of representation. CSR managers should maintain ongoing engagement with LGBT communities to keep corporate messaging aligned with evolving social understanding.

Beyond managerial implications, this study highlights economic opportunities for brands that tailor advertising to align with gay consumers' identity expectations. By leveraging highly implicit advertising in both friendly and unfriendly markets—while respecting local norms—brands can build stronger emotional connections with gay consumers (Lewis et al., 2024). This can lead to increased brand loyalty, better customer retention (Lewis et al., 2024), and higher lifetime customer value (Demunter & Bauwens, 2023). As LGBT consumers form a growing segment with significant purchasing power—the "pink economy"—authentic and inclusive advertising offers access to a valuable, often under-engaged market (Cheng et al., 2022), especially for fashion, lifestyle, and luxury brands where identity and self-expression strongly influence purchasing behavior.

## **7.2. Limitations and Future Research**

Recruiting gay participants, especially in unfriendly markets, is challenging due to social stigma and legal constraints that discourage open identity disclosure. This study used snowball sampling as a practical method, despite its limitations—such as potential sampling bias and limited researcher control, which may lead to sample homogeneity. To improve diversity in future studies, researchers should engage participants from multiple LGBT communities. For example, future research could address the point of view of homosexuals who



can be considered activists or conservatives. This approach would broaden representation beyond a single social network. Moreover, Cheah et al. (2021) found that there are differences in gender (male vs. female) explicating intersectionality. Thus, future research should account for intersectionality as a control variable.

Although the sample size is sufficient for this study, future studies could increase the sample size to enhance the power of the experiment, where a typical power selection is 0.80 (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). In addition, the signs of homosexuality used in the ad stimulation were based on the confirmation from interviews with 6 people. For future research, we suggest a focus group discussion to gather information from more people regarding homosexual signs that can be identified universally.

The current study focuses on the representation of homosexuality, specifically gay men, excluding lesbian, bisexual, and transgender groups. Future research could broaden the scope by examining other sexual and gender identities. Future studies could also investigate how prior exposure to LGBT advertising or media influences consumer responses to implicit gay ads. Familiarity with LGBT content may affect how individuals interpret implicit signals, so incorporating self-reported exposure could yield richer insights.

Another promising area is exploring the psychological mechanisms behind the preference for implicit LGBT ads. Using methods like eye-tracking, neuromarketing, or reaction-time experiments, future research could assess how different implicit cues affect emotional engagement, memory retention, and brand recall, offering deeper insights into the cognitive and affective processes driving advertising effectiveness.

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