

## **Between Tolerance, Embarrassment and Rainbow Washing Suspicion – Perceptions of LGBT Symbols in Business Communication among Men**

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**Abstract.** An increasing number of companies and service providers use LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) symbols, such as the rainbow flag, in their business communication. Recent literature indicates that not all (potential) customers are in favor of LGBT symbols in communication. Rejection is even higher among men. This leads to the question of what motives drive skepticism and rejection of LGBT symbols in business communication. To answer this research question, eight qualitative interviews were conducted with Gen Z men. The results indicate that the perceptions are driven by the need for belonging and tolerance, but also by the fear of being judged by others in the peer group and the resulting embarrassment, as well as the suspicion of rainbow washing. This article contributes to the existing literature by explaining positive and negative perceptions of LGBT communication and brand activism in general.

**Key words.** LGBT Communication, Rainbow Washing, Embarrassment, Brand Activism, Purpose Marketing

## Introduction

More and more companies and service providers are using LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) symbols such as the rainbow in their communications (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Hauksson-Tresch, 2021). One reason for this is that consumers expect companies to make a corresponding statement in order to align their own principles with the company's values (Narayanan & Das, 2021). Another reason is to target a specific LGBT segment (Northey et al., 2020). For example, the tobacco industry focused its communications on LGBT audiences already in the 1990s and early 2000s (Drabble, 2000; Stevens et al., 2004). Taking a stance for LGBT also often happens in the context of brand activism (Moorman, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The depiction of the rainbow on products or in connection with services is a symbol of tolerant views of the company (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). However, it should also be mentioned that the marketing of rainbow products is not necessarily a direct indication of a company's attitude. Rather, concrete efforts for the LGBT community are necessary. If this is not implemented, the use of LGBT symbols can lead to a negative perception or even suspicion of rainbow washing from the customer's point of view (Johns et al., 2022; Mücksch et al., 2024; Wulf et al., 2022). In addition, the use of LGBT symbols can also be associated with aversion (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). If one considers the use of LGBT symbols as a means of brand activism, controversy can be assumed, which by definition also includes partial rejection on the customer side (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

When looking at gender-specific perceptions, it is noticeable that men in particular tend to have more negative attitudes towards rainbow products and services and cannot imagine buying them (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Mücksch et al., 2024; Um, 2014). For instance, Um et al. (2016) show that Korean women have more positive attitudes towards LGBT advertising than men. Similarly, Cunningham and Melton (2014) prove that US women are more likely than men to join a fitness club that uses LGBT symbols. Buying a LGBT product can even be associated with shame, especially among men (Mücksch et al., 2023). This leads to the question, why the perception of LGBT symbols in business communication differs. The aim of this study is therefore to clarify **which motives influence the perception of rainbow products and services within a male Generation Z target group.**

In the following, we refer to products or services that use LGBT symbols, in particular the rainbow, as rainbow products or rainbow services. We consider Generation Z because values such as tolerance, gender equality, and LGBT-equality are particularly relevant here (Fromm & Read, 2018). For theory, this research aims to find reasons that lead to positive and negative perceptions of LGBT symbols in business communication. For practice, this article aims to raise awareness among service providers of the potential negative effects of using LGBT symbols such as the rainbow.

## Theoretical Background

The rainbow flag designed by Gilbert Baker has become a symbol of commitment in recent years (Hauksson-Tresch, 2021). Due to the lack of a patent application, companies are permitted to commercialize the flag and adapt it into their own product range without restriction (Rossi, 2020). The values associated with the symbol testify to an openness and modernity that numerous actors try to represent by incorporating the rainbow into their actions (Bitterman & Hess, 2021). For example, districts or entire cities fly the flag on their town halls (ibid.). Furthermore, companies are beginning to use the flag across target groups and implement rainbow marketing as a strategy (Ciszek, 2018; Ciszek & Pounders, 2020; Fisher & Antonelli, 2023). Rainbow marketing should be seen here as a mean used by companies to take a stand on issues that are currently relevant within society (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

The temporary use of such a strategy has led to significantly more criticism, especially in recent years (Li, 2022). The reason for this is the increasing awareness of customers with regard to rainbow washing which implies the usage of LGBT symbols without real conviction (Johns et al., 2022; Schopper et al., 2024; Wulf et al., 2022). As rainbow marketing is finding favor in numerous industries and is therefore being used more and more frequently, the target group fears a loss of meaning of the rainbow symbol (Regener et al., 2020). In order to avoid the impression of rainbow washing, it is crucial to act internally and externally to actively spread values such as tolerance and diversity (Ciszek & Lim, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Basically, the perception of rainbow products or services depends on personal attitudes towards homosexuality or the entire LGBT community (Bhat et al., 1998; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Um et al., 2016). Furthermore, the perception of homosexuality is based on a traditional belief in gender roles (Kite & Whitley, 1996). This belief is held more strongly by men than by women, which in turn serves to confirm this view (Um, 2014). Accordingly, males have a lower tolerance for homosexuality as it violates the gender role approach (ibid.). Homosexually orientated advertising images can therefore trigger emotional reactions such as rejection, especially with regard to a purchase decision, so that companies face a major challenge in this regard (Bhat et al., 1998; Um et al., 2016).

In addition to this, Angelini & Bradley (2010) explain the so-called in-group and out-group effect. Based on the need to belong to a group, consumers try to be part of a group in which members pursue similar values (Bhat et al., 1998). Using in-group comparisons, the preferences of the members are filtered out and transferred to the self (Angelini & Bradley, 2010; Bhat et al., 1998). Consumers strengthen their self-esteem by orienting themselves towards this and the resulting differentiation from others, i.e. so-called out-groups (Angelini & Bradley, 2010). Accordingly, customers react positively to advertising images that reflect their in-group (Um, 2014). If a heterosexual customer group is confronted with a homosexual-orientated advertisement, this is the out-group. As a result, negative emotions, such as shame, can arise because it can be seen as a violation of norms by the in-group (Haidt, 2003; Krettenauer et al., 2013; Tangney et al., 2007). Similarly, embarrassment is like shame, but less long-lasting and more situational (Tangney et al., 1996). As a result, it can be theorized that homosexual customer groups recognize such advertising images as in-group and are less prone to negative emotions such as shame or embarrassment.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative study with in-depth interviews was conducted in May and June 2024 in Germany in order to provide an answer to the research question posed. The chosen type of interview is particularly advantageous here, as subconscious reasons for certain decisions, i.e. meaning structures, emerge (Granot et al., 2012). The so-called laddering technique, which is based on Gutman's (1982) means-end theory, is used in the interview. A characteristic of the qualitative method is the repeated asking of "why" questions (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). This provides insights into personally relevant aspects or motives for relevance (ibid.). In relation to this, attributes, consequences and values can be distinguished from one another (ibid.).

The following Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the interviewees:

Interviewees (n=8)	Age	Profession
P1	24	Student Mechanical Engineering
P2	25	Student Educational Sciences
P3	21	Student Media Technology
P4	23	Student Geography
P5	25	Artist
P6	25	IT specialist
P7	24	Student Economics
P8	25	Student Teaching

*Table 1: Demographic indicators of the men interviewed (source: own presentation).*

Only men were interviewed because this study aims to understand men's perception in particular. For reasons of practicability, eight people from the authors's own social environment were selected for the study. In order to avoid an interviewer bias, deliberate care was taken to ensure that the respondents were not from the closest social environment of the authors. The interviewees were informed of all rights under the General Data Protection Regulation and signed a corresponding declaration. Confidentiality was particularly emphasized. At the beginning of the interview, each interviewee was shown everyday examples of LGBT content (e.g., a restaurant with a rainbow flag in the window or a bottle with a printed rainbow) as an introduction to the conversation in order to visualize the topic of the interview. In addition, this further ensures that the men have a firm understanding of rainbow communication. In addition, the interviewees can use the examples as reference points during the interviews to orient themselves or, for example, to determine their perception at that moment and then question it further.

As part of the evaluation of the in-depth interviews, a content-structuring qualitative content analysis was carried out according to Kuckartz (2019).

## **Results and Discussion**

To summarize the results, a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) was created. The results are shown in Figure 1:

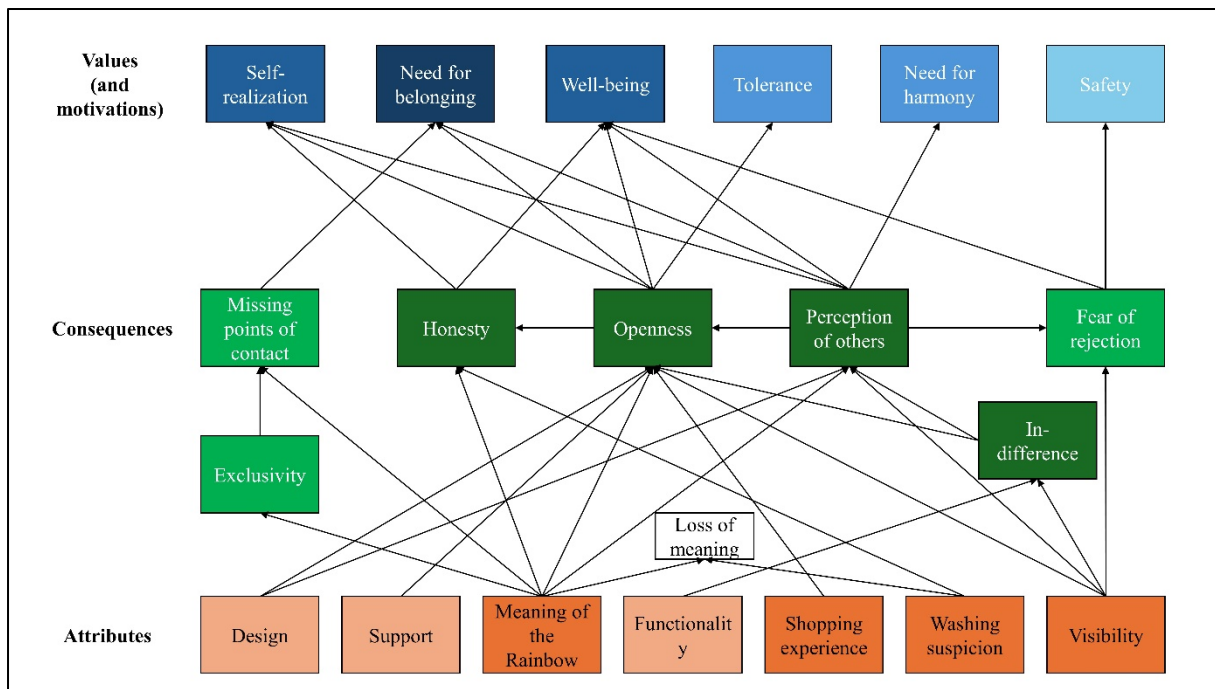


Figure 1: Hierarchical Value Map (HVM).

Several contradictions that emerged during interviews are particularly interesting. One example is P4, who initially gives the impression of an open attitude. However, it later becomes clear that the conspicuousness of the LGBT symbol and the associated consequences play a major role for P4:

*“But I could imagine that in some situations I would perhaps try not to present the bottle so obviously now, if I have the feeling that I’m in an environment where it could perhaps somehow lead to conflict.” (translated)*

The importance of the perception of others emerges in several interviews. In this case, the importance of the perception of others and consequently of belonging emerges from the orientation towards social norms. Unlike initially described by the interviewees, stereotypical ways of thinking still seem to be firmly anchored in everyday life. Homosexuality violates corresponding norms and is therefore perceived as strange or unpleasant (Lane, 2021; Lyonga, 2021). The men interviewed do not directly admit to such an attitude so as not to weaken the impression of tolerant behavior. **Showing tolerance** is a motive which can be observed in many interviews. Nevertheless, statements show that there is a **fear of rejection** by one's own environment.

The most important motive in the study, the **need for belonging**, is associated with **shame and embarrassment**. As previously explained, shame and embarrassment are closely linked to orientation towards the environment (Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007). People therefore try to live up to the expectations or social norms of society in order to avoid exclusion and to be recognized as a part of the group. Situations that do not allow this can cause shame in men, or embarrassment. Respondent P7 state:

*“Well, if this were this jute bag, I wouldn't find it very comfortable to walk around and I would avoid it, for example, but if it were like a lighter, then I wouldn't care.” (translated)*

However, it is also worth mentioning that the need for belonging results from an **openness** toward LGBT symbols in business communication. Furthermore, several respondents stated

that they are not part of the LGBT community and therefore did not feel the need to use LGBT symbols to signal their affiliation to the community.

Another motive that offers the possibility of interpretation is the **need for harmony**. The attempt to please other people and **avoid conflict** is based on social acceptance. In doing so, one's own opinion or personal attitude is neglected. Instead, the social environment serves as orientation and offers opportunities for adaptation. For example, P4 takes care to positively influence how others perceive him in order to avoid rejection. By avoiding products with a visible rainbow design, he offers his social environment no opportunities for attack if they do not conform to the meaning of the symbol. The same applies to P6, who rejects such products in certain situations in order to avoid disagreements with other people. Avoiding negative attention serves personal peace and harmony. This goes hand in hand with safety, another motive on the HVM. This is also based on the fear of rejection. The expectation of “physical assault”, as is the case with P1, leads to the avoidance of rainbow products or services. The aim here is to protect oneself and **ensure one's own safety**.

In contrast, there is a chain between the shopping experience, openness and self-realization. The interviewees, including P2, associate the shopping experience and the people on site with a “**positive atmosphere**”. The reason for this is the assumption that rainbow services are primarily used by individuals belonging to the LGBT community. In turn, P2 sees this as a group in which “every opinion is recognized”. The behavior characterized by acceptance encourages men to **express their individuality and personality**. A correspondingly diverse environment gives the impression that there is the opportunity for **self-realization**. Accordingly, the shopping experience can be linked to **personal fulfillment** through the prevailing openness in an environment of rainbow products or services and positively influence perception.

Furthermore, a **skepticism** can be observed among the interviewees that the company's communication is not in line with the company's actions, which is referred to as **rainbow washing** (Johns et al., 2022; Schopper et al., 2024; Wulf et al., 2022). Some respondents have concerns that the meaning of the rainbow as a symbol may lose its meaning. Subsequently, the chain of rainbow washing suspicion runs from **honesty** to **well-being**. Accordingly, a perceived rainbow washing can generate a negative attitude towards rainbow products or services. The reason for this is that “honesty is one of the most important values”, according to P8. Respondents therefore expect companies to only use such symbols if they fulfill the meaning of these. By assuming that this is not the case, a fundamental aversion to such products or services can be created.

## **Implications, Limitations, Outlook**

The results indicate that fear of rejection or lack of recognition are key reasons for partially negative perceptions. The reason for this is the generally lower tolerance among men (Um, 2014; Um et al., 2016). The suspicion of rainbow washing also plays a role. For research, this empirical survey contributes to a better understanding of possible negative reactions to LGBT symbols. At the same time, it also provides explanations for positive perceptions: In this context, the need for belonging, harmony, self-realization, tolerance, and well-being can also be identified as central motives.

For practice, we demonstrate that a match between the LGBT symbol and the company is crucial to avoid suspicions of rainbow washing. This is particularly relevant considering the anticipated loss of meaning of the symbol, which is triggered by inflationary rainbow marketing (Regener et al., 2020). The findings clearly show that a lack of credibility can negatively impact

perception in this context. To avoid suspicions of rainbow washing, companies are called upon to closely examine their fundamental beliefs, such as their vision and mission. Only when the values associated with the rainbow flag, such as tolerance and diversity, are genuinely practiced within the company, the usage of rainbow marketing can be considered authentic. In addition, communicating and practicing LGBT friendliness could also help to recruit members of the community who would otherwise not apply for certain positions. A necessary measure to achieve this is the implementation of guidelines that companies can follow to measure tolerance in everyday business operations. Furthermore, companies can only strengthen their credibility if they engage in rainbow marketing outside of Pride Month in June as well, for instance by supporting events financially. Therefore, it could be considered authentic for companies to donate a part of the revenue from LGBT framed products to LGBT NGOs (Champlin & Li, 2020).

Several limitations should be mentioned. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the sample was collected in Germany. As the average attitudes towards LGBT equality differ from country to country (Wilson, 2020), it can be assumed that respondents from other countries may show different motives. Further research could investigate whether these findings are the same in other countries or whether the motives are different. In addition, the role of different religions can be examined (Bratton et al., 2020), and it could be determined, whether gender differences differ by culture or religion.

Second, only interviews with men were conducted, because a higher rejection of LGBT symbols can be assumed among men (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Mücksch et al., 2023; Um et al., 2016). However, future research should investigate which motives drive the perception of LGBT content among women. A second study with the same sample characteristics (age, occupation) and with the same interview method (same guide) with female interviewees could be conducted in order to have a direct comparison between men and women.

Third, a qualitative approach was chosen. The sample size of eight participants can be regarded as sufficient for qualitative insights, but limits generalizability. Further research could verify whether the same results hold when a quantitative study is conducted with a larger sample. More specifically, a quantitative study could investigate the extent to which motives such as self-realization, the need for belonging, the need for harmony or safety arise when people are confronted with LGBT content in business communication. In addition, it would be of particular interest to see whether the findings are independent of age groups. As mentioned in the introduction, it can be assumed that LGBT-related values differ according to generation (Fromm & Read, 2018). Moreover, it would be interesting to see whether there are differences depending on the product (low involvement vs. high involvement) or depending on the socio-economic status of the (potential) customer (la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018; van den Akker et al., 2013). To the best of our knowledge, no research so far has examined the impact of company size or industry.

Future research could also examine company websites and see if and how rainbow labels are verbalized. A strong discrepancy between label and verbalization could indicate rainbow washing.

These limitations highlight the great potential for future research in an emerging field.

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