

RAINBOW-WASHING THE MEDIA

by

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This research project aims to determine the difference between authentic marketing and rainbow-washing when advertising to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) consumer segment. Rainbow-washing is when businesses publicly support and represent the LGBTQIA2S+ community while privately acting and engaging in contradictory practices. This project will look at ads from the leading national advertisers in 2019 to see how companies represent queer communities and the motives behind advertisements. Companies that engage in rainbow-washing focus primarily on increased profit or the growing demand for LGBTQIA2S+ friendly products within the LGBTQIA2S+ community segment. On the other hand, authentic marketing accurately and respectfully represents the LGBTQIA2S+ community while not feeding into stereotypes or profiting at their expense. The prioritization of authenticity allows companies to connect with the LGBTQIA2S+ consumer segment successfully and is imperative to create inclusivity among markets.

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Introduction

Marketing reflects society and its ideals and values, elaborated on by companies as they work to reach their target market. Many companies have slowly become more prominent and open when reflecting this by representing queer communities (queer meaning individuals who identify as LGBTQIA2S+). For the purpose of this study, the LGBTQIA2S+ community will be referred to as the LGBTQ+. In 2019, the LGBTQ+ consumer segment's purchase power was estimated as \$3.9 trillion.¹ Having such significant purchase power means that a large amount of attention is aimed toward these consumers, with companies eager to include them in their target market. These tactics can vary from specific product packaging, advertisements portraying queer folk, or public statements expressing support for the queer community.

A common example of these tactics occurs in June as it is recognized as Pride Month. Throughout the month, companies can be seen changing their profile pictures to involve the rainbow, a symbol representing what is commonly seen as the gay pride flag, including more queer representation in their campaigns, and even holding corporate booths at pride festivals around the world. Many companies utilize the month of June and its symbolism to connect with their queer audiences by promoting their advocacy in the media. Companies have also begun to include more LGBTQ+ in their marketing and services throughout the rest of the year. However, these marketing tactics and campaigns do not always accurately portray company beliefs and actions.

Rainbow-washing, otherwise known as when businesses publicly show support for and represent the LGBTQ+ community while privately acting and engaging in contradictory

¹ *LGBT Capital*

practices, displays the hypocrisies of capitalism in the name of brand images and profitability.² As companies begin to have more progressive beliefs, there has been an increase in queer representation. However, the motive behind this representation becomes differentiated by looking into company practices such as donations to organizations and politicians, as well as other actions that contradict consumer perception. This project research analyzes companies and the usage of queer representation versus rainbow-washing by analyzing monetary donations and other actions that either support or conflict with their public stance.

For queer individuals, the line between rainbow-washing and actual representation can be extremely important when determining brands to identify with and support. Truthful, supportive representation is extremely important as so many of the LGBTQ+ community's rights are at crossfires on state and federal levels. With this project, I hope to determine how rainbow-washing is exhibited and to what effect.

Research Question

What differentiates rainbow-washing from authentic queer representation in marketing?

How do companies utilize rainbow-washing and to what effect?

Literature Review

As companies become more progressive, queer representation in media holds major implications for both queer and non-queer-identifying communities. Representation of a target market and their identities creates a positive consumer perspective for companies and commonly helps with brand image and profitability. However, this can be seen as an ulterior motive when advertising campaigns do not accurately reflect the beliefs of a company. Current research

² Dadani, S., Martinolich, M., & Ramdeen, K. "Thing to Know: Rainbow-Washing."

reflects the idea of rainbow-washing but frequently lacks in-depth information on what differentiates it from regular advertisements and the different manners of representation. Public actions of a company versus their private practices can create discord between what a company may stand for and its goals with specific actions.

Outside of queer communities, rainbow-washing is an ignored topic, allowing companies to commit nefarious acts without any tangible backlash. It is important to bring rainbow-washing to the attention of society and hold companies accountable for their actions on a public scale. Supporting companies who partake in rainbow-washing creates risk for queer communities and their rights as profits may be used to partake in practices against them. Transparency, along with the accountability of companies and their actions, holds an important impact on consumer perception, making it imperative to observe the actions of companies and determine their motives.

Methods

Due to the nature of the research questions, I will look at advertisements from 2019, mainly from the companies identified as the leading national advertisers of that year. 2019 was chosen as it reflects the progressive era and the uptick of inclusive marketing directly before the impacts of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). The pandemic impacted all industries and changed many aspects of traditional marketing up until recently, as many companies have begun to return to their normal, pre-pandemic operations.

The primary companies were selected from a market report provided by AdAge titled “Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack.”³ Although this Fact Pack acts as a forecast for the advertising economy in the calendar year 2020, the information is based on data derived from 2019. The leading national advertisers were ranked by their total spending towards advertising in 2019 in dollar amount. The leading national advertisers of 2019 that will be studied in this case are Amazon, AT&T, Procter & Gamble Co., Walt Disney Company, Alphabet (Google), and Verizon Communications.⁴

The variety of industries presented in this list creates a broad scope of examples and different applications from each company, providing a realistic view of what is typically seen by the public. Companies such as Procter & Gamble and Walt Disney Company also act as parent companies for a variety of other brands, creating a variety of examples to be studied.

Looking at leading national advertisers and their actions in 2019 will be extremely helpful as well as imperative in finding topical information to differentiate the usage of authentic queer marketing versus rainbow-washing.

³ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

⁴ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

After determining the companies, I analyzed marketing campaigns and statements from 2019, specifically those that contain queer representation or targeted marketing, and determine the nature of the ad, its purpose, and its consequences. As I am interested specifically in rainbow-washing, I will look at the purpose of the ad and whether it has related impacts on the queer community through notable donations to organizations such as the Trevor Project or others that support LGBTQ+ communities. Once I have identified these ads and their nature, I will research the selected companies and their practices and how they may cement or invalidate their public stance within the ad. Examples include whether donations towards organizations that are harmful to the queer community have been made, public statements of the company, and lobbying regarding political campaigns and their impacts on the queer communities.

For this project, authentic advertisements and actions will be defined as those that accurately and respectfully represent the LGBTQ+ community. This can happen through the representation of or the presence of said individuals in a non-tokenized or stereotyped matter through their experiences, identities, and relationships. Authenticity works to reflect both the diversity and complexity of queer individuals through the involvement and presence of their own voices, experiences, and perspectives.

Results

The primary companies studied for this research were Google, Amazon, AT&T, Verizon Communications, Procter & Gamble, Walt Disney Company, and IKEA. These companies were analyzed individually for their actions and will be grouped based on whether they were determined to partake in rainbow-washing.

The first group of companies to be presented are those that exhibited rainbow-washing behavior. These companies are AT&T, Verizon Communications, Walt Disney Company, and Amazon.

AT&T

Telecommunications company AT&T was ranked as the third leading national advertiser in 2019, spending a total of \$5,484,000 for advertising in the US. AT&T has consistently positioned itself as an ally and supporter of the LGBTQ+ community.⁵ In 1987, the company established *LEAGUE*, one of the first and oldest LGBTQ+ community and ally groups for employees in the US.⁶ Additionally, in 2018, the company launched an employee recognition program titled Turn Up the Love, an “events and editorial initiative to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and to promote acceptance and allyship.”⁷ AT&T is a partner of the annual LoveLoud Pride Music Festival, queer media advocacy organization Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and the Trevor Project, a crisis and suicide intervention and prevention service for LGBTQ+ youth.

In 2019, AT&T openly supported the LGBTQ+ community in several ways. One focal point for the company was it receiving a score of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign’s

⁵ AdAge. “Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack.”

⁶ “Commitments.”

⁷ “About.”

Corporate Equality Index (CEI) in 2019.⁸ The CEI is a benchmarking tool used to rate corporate policies, practices, and benefits regarding LGBTQ+ employees.⁹ Following their score of 100 on the CEI, AT&T joined the Human Rights Campaign’s (HRC) Freedom for All Americans Education Fund’s Business Statement on Anti-LGBTQ State Legislation, a letter consisting of signatures from 318 major companies and associations condemning legislation and state bills that isolate queer individuals for discriminatory treatment.¹⁰

Alongside their 2019 partnership with the LoveLoud Pride Festival in West Valley City, Utah, AT&T celebrated the first weekend of Pride Month in Salt Lake City. AT&T rode their motive to #TurnUpTheLove in a variety of ways that weekend, including a promotional float in the Sunday Pride Parade.^{11,12} AT&T has prided itself on being an ally since 1975 when they were one of the first American corporations to adopt a policy against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, which they showcased with their 1970s-themed float in Salt Lake City, donned with roller skates, rainbows, and music from Heart.^{13,14} Additionally, AT&T put up a temporary #TurnUpTheLoveSalon to “make everyone look and feel fabulous while celebrating LGBTQ+ pride” with 1970s-inspired looks created by popular queer beauty guru Jose Jiménez (@laviedunprince on Instagram).^{15,16}

As stated by Valerie Vargas, Senior Vice President for Advertising for the company, “Our commitment is genuine. We acknowledge and respect people for who they are so people feel visible and appreciated. As a direct result we believe the LGBTQ community has become

⁸ Human Rights Campaign. *Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality*.

⁹ “The 2022 Corporate Equality Index.”

¹⁰ “Business Statement on Anti-LGBTQ State Legislation.”

¹¹ Averdick, Dave. “The First Weekend of Pride.”

¹² Appendix 1

¹³ “Supporting the LGBTQ+ Community.”

¹⁴ Averdick, Dave. “The First Weekend of Pride.”

¹⁵ IBID

¹⁶ Appendix 2

more loyal to our brand.”¹⁷ Further discussing the importance of the connection with the queer community and AT&T, Vargas said,

“Diversity and inclusivity in marketing is the only way to do business because our customers are diverse, our employees are diverse, and the global market is diverse. The world is getting smaller, which means acknowledging and respecting all people is the only way to do business.”¹⁸

Outside of Pride Month, AT&T continued to represent the LGBTQ+ community in their advertisements, most notably the inclusion of a gay couple in a commercial series titled *JustOK*.^{19,20} The commercial highlights two husbands looking for a babysitter for their daughter, realizing their ideal for more than a ‘just OK’ babysitter, mirroring the idea that consumers should seek products and services that excel from AT&T rather than the bare minimum from their competitors. The acknowledgment of the LGBTQ+ community outside of Pride Month is critical as it works to normalize the existence of queer folk year-round rather than playing into stereotypes and choosing to represent a group of people at times other than when they potentially bring the most profit.

Although AT&T openly supported the LGBTQ+ community in the public eye, their political contributions conflicted with the company’s public stance. In 2019 alone, AT&T donated \$2,755,000 to 193 politicians actively campaigning against LGBTQ+ rights.²¹ One notable politician from these contributions is Tennessee Senator Marsha Blackburn, who received over \$22,000 from AT&T.²² The average amount AT&T contributed to senators in the

¹⁷ Odell, Patty. “The Many Ways AT&T Shares Pro-LGBTQ Messages.

¹⁸ IBID

¹⁹ *OK is not OK - Babysitter*

²⁰ Appendix 3

²¹ Legum, Judd. “These Rainbow Flag-Waving Corporations”

²² IBID

same election cycle was \$7,265, meaning Blackburn received over three times the donation than other senators.²³

Senator Blackburn has been a vocal supporter of the reduction of transgender rights in the military, voted against LGBTQ-inclusive anti-hate crimes legislation, opposed the Violence Against Women Act solely due to its intended protections for LGBTQ+ people, and is against marriage equality.²⁴ As expressed by Blackburn herself, "I have always supported traditional marriage ... no one can overrule the truth about what marriage actually is - a sacred institution between a man and a woman."²⁵ Additionally, contrasting the complete score of 100 from AT&T on the CEI, Blackburn received a 0.²⁶ Senator Blackburn is just one out of nearly 200 politicians that received monetary contributions from AT&T while actively working against the LGBTQ+ community.

The company's own employee-funded Political Action Committee (PAC), the *AT&T Inc. Employee Federal PAC*, spent \$4,736,067 in 2019, with a majority of these funds going to members of the Republican Party.²⁷ Over half of this amount was contributed toward politicians who are explicitly against the HRC's Equality Act that AT&T had signed and took a public stance of support on that year.²⁸ These contradictory donations conflict deeply with AT&T's seemingly fundamental values, as mentioned previously by Vargas. This inconsistency causes conflict and concern as to whether AT&T's values and actions are authentic or if they are simply using this support for the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing tactic.

²³ "AT&T Inc Profile: Recipients."

²⁴ Okma, MJ. "Tennessee Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn's Anti-LGBTQ Activist History."

²⁵ Legum, Judd. "These Rainbow Flag-Waving Corporations"

²⁶ IBID

²⁷ "AT&T Inc Profile: Recipients."

²⁸ Champlin, Reid. "Companies' Political Spending Contradicts Pride Support."

Verizon Communications

In the same industry as AT&T, telecommunications company Verizon Communications (Verizon) was ranked as one of the top ten leading national advertisers, ranking seventh having spent \$3,071,000 on advertising in the year 2019.²⁹ The company has positioned itself as an ally, using both its products and technology to support and uplift its LGBTQ+ consumers through connection.

In 2019 Verizon donated \$250,000 to PFLAG, an organization dedicated to LGBTQ+ advocacy and education, providing support to continue the organization's work.^{30,31} Alongside the donation, Verizon partnered with PFLAG in a campaign titled *Connected by Pride* to release an advertisement titled "Love Calls Back."^{32,33} The three-minute-long video was directed by Lee Hirsch, a queer director, and features genuine shots of members of the LGBTQ+ community calling their family members and reconciling after coming out as queer.^{34,35} The authenticity of the video reflects a common struggle faced by many people in the LGBTQ+ community, disapproval and displacement as a result of being who you are. Verizon worked with multiple families who had faced fallouts and worked to reconnect them, showing the possibility of love and acceptance when given a second chance. Pairing with PFLAG allowed the organization to connect over 400 of its chapters and offer real-life second chances like those seen in the commercial.³⁶

²⁹ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

³⁰ "About Us."

³¹ "Love Calls Back."

³² Paladino, Olivia. "Verizon: A Champion for LGBTQ Rights Every Day."

³³ "Love Calls Back."

³⁴ Bednarski, P. J. "Marketing Daily: Verizon 'pride' Month Video Gives Families Second Chance to Reconcile."

³⁵ Appendix 4

³⁶ Paladino, Olivia. "Verizon: A Champion for LGBTQ Rights Every Day."

In 2019, Verizon also acted as the first-ever title sponsor of LA Pride and had over 300 employees, otherwise known as VTeamers, in attendance to represent the company.³⁷³⁸ Many of said VTeamers are members of GLOBE, (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Employees of Verizon and their Allies), an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for queer employees of the company.³⁹ GLOBE was recognized in 2016 by Out and Equal, a workplace non-profit organization, as a finalist for LGBTQ ERG of the Year.⁴⁰

Verizon promotes its dedication to employees and equality, stating that they are “committed to providing a curriculum that helps all employees mitigate bias and support conscious inclusion.”⁴¹ The company is a signer of the Business Coalition for Equality Act as well.⁴² Despite these efforts, Verizon scored a 90 on the HRC’s 2019 CEI due to a lack of equivalency between same and different-sex domestic partner medical benefits.⁴³ This rating was a drop from the previous year’s score of 100.⁴⁴

Additionally, Verizon donated over \$1,022,800 between 2017-18 to 74 politicians that actively worked against pro-LGBTQ+ legislature and proposals in 2019.⁴⁵ This amount is over four times the donation made to PFLAG, resulting in a large conflict between the company’s stated values and actions. Two prominent recipients of these funds are the state of Texas’ House Representative, Kevin Brady, and Marsha Blackburn, Senator of Tennessee.⁴⁶ Both Brady and

³⁷ “Verizon Celebrates Pride Month.”

³⁸ “Love Calls Back.”

³⁹ “Let’s Talk About Pride.”

⁴⁰ Paladino, Olivia. “Verizon: A Champion for LGBTQ Rights Every Day.”

⁴¹ “Diversity and Inclusion.”

⁴² Berg-Brousseau, Henry. “200+ Major U.S. Companies Oppose Anti-LGBTQ+ State Legislation.”

⁴³ Human Rights Campaign. *Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality*.

⁴⁴ IBID

⁴⁵ Legum, Judd. “These Rainbow Flag-Waving Corporations”

⁴⁶ “2019 Political Engagement Report End of Year Disclosure.”

Blackburn have strictly aligned themselves as “pro-family” Christians that believe marriage is meant to solely be between one man and one woman.⁴⁷

Despite the efforts to represent LGBTQ+ consumers and employees, Verizon’s authenticity in these actions fell short and is overshadowed by its large number of political contributions that challenge the ideals the company has publicly promoted.

⁴⁷ Garza, Frida. “Happy Pride from AT&T and the \$1.8 Million It Gave to Anti-LGBTQ+ and Republican Candidates.”

Walt Disney Company

Mass media giant Walt Disney Company was ranked fifth in leading national advertisers, spending over \$3,154,000 on advertisements in 2019.⁴⁸ Walt Disney Company (Disney) is known for its toys, streaming platform Disney +, television shows, children's movies, and popular theme parks Disneyland and Walt Disney World.⁴⁹ In regard to the company's beliefs on diversity and equity, Chief Diversity Officer Latondra Newton states "At Disney, we amplify underrepresented voices and untold stories and champion a multitude of perspectives, recognizing that we are all greater than a single story and we all deserve to feel seen, heard and understood."⁵⁰

Despite the company's statement on amplification and highlighting underrepresented communities, it has historically lacked representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in its media. In 2019, the company made history when its first character came out as gay on the television show *Andi Mack*.⁵¹ Moreover, in 2019, the GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index ranked Disney in last place and gave it a failing grade for its lack of LGBT-inclusivity in the media it produced.⁵²

The main LGBTQ+ representation seen from Disney in 2019 was the release of the *Rainbow Disney Collection* in June.⁵³ The *Rainbow Disney Collection* consists of regular products from the Disney Shop redesigned to be rainbow colored, including Mickey Mouse plushies, the company's popular mouse ears, and MagicBands that act as a virtual pass to the park.⁵⁴ Despite touting the rainbow, only 10% of profits from this collection were donated to the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an organization that works to provide

⁴⁸ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

⁴⁹ "The Walt Disney Family of Companies."

⁵⁰ "Diversity & Inclusion."

⁵¹ Morrison, Tony. "'Andi Mack' Makes History with First Disney Channel Character to Say 'I'm Gay.'"

⁵² "Overview of Findings (2019)."

⁵³ Appendix 5

⁵⁴ Block, Tara. "Rainbow Disney Pride 2019 Collection."

safe and affirming schools to LGBTQ+ youth.⁵⁵ This means that Disney profited 90% of the sales of the collection, creating conflict between the perceived benefit of the consumers' purchases and who is actually benefiting. The basis of *The Rainbow Collection* holds inclusive appeal on the outside but falls short regarding the authenticity of the company's actions.

Disney Parks also featured a variety of exclusive rainbow-colored desserts and beverages in October of 2019.^{56,57} Despite the fun and appealing looks of the treats that target the LGBTQ+ community, they held no authenticity in the form of support or respect for the community. Using rainbow-themed products with no further action is seen as a cash-grab, solely used for commercial gain without a genuine commitment to inclusion or representation. Authentic allyship requires more than using the rainbow on a product, but instead actively supporting LGBTQ+ rights, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for equality throughout the year rather than just during Pride Month. It is important to listen to and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community rather than profiting off of their symbols with no further action.

⁵⁵ Block, Tara. "Rainbow Disney Pride 2019 Collection."

⁵⁶ Inigo, Joey. "Disneyland Resort Launches Rainbow Treats, Merch for GAY DAYS 2019 Weekend."

⁵⁷ Appendix 6

Amazon

In 2019, e-commerce company Amazon was ranked as the top leading national advertiser, spending a total of \$6,879,000 solely in the US.⁵⁸ Being widely known and accessible in nearly every country, Amazon has had its fair share of experience in reaching target markets through various forms of advertisements and media channels as a powerful oligopoly.

In 2019, Amazon received a complete 100 on the HRC's CEI and was also a member of the Business Coalition for Equality Act.⁵⁹ Along with Amazon's connection with the HRC and positive public perception, Amazon focused on marketing tactics to promote the company's support and allyship for its employees. The company's stance on diversity, equity, and inclusion appears as the premiere value of the company when advertising the company culture, reigning above safety and sustainability.⁶⁰

In general, Amazon has adopted seemingly authentic marketing approach when targeting the LGBTQ+ community, specifically by using a representation that is normalized, not stereotypical, and not limited to only being shared during Pride Month. This approach has helped Amazon avoid the stigma typically associated with Pride Month marketing tactics and, instead, has positively impacted public perception as the everyday existence of queer individuals is normalized throughout the year. A notable example of this is in the company's 2019 commercial titled "Happy Holidays," a musical montage that shares a scene of a lesbian couple embracing as they reunite for the holidays.^{61,62} These tactics are subtle yet effective when conveying the importance of inclusivity to the LGBTQ+ consumer segment and have assisted the company in

⁵⁸ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

⁵⁹ Human Rights Campaign. Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality.

⁶⁰ "Our Culture."

⁶¹ Amazon. Amazon - Happy Holidays (2019)

⁶² Appendix 7

building trust and loyalty through the demographic, breaking barriers and promoting diversity and inclusion.

Due to the e-commerce nature of Amazon, its advertisements range from a variety of aspects, such as employment, products, and other things that improve public perception of the company. Rather than utilizing Pride Month to focus on and target the LGBTQ+ sector of the market, Amazon worked throughout the year to represent its connection with the community and its ideals. The importance the company shows in supporting its employees in all matters is extremely prevalent through Amazon's marketing, as seen in a commercial titled "Work Hard" that premiered in 2019.⁶³ "Work Hard" is a commercial that aired in 2019 for applying to work at Amazon, promoting the warehouse culture of Amazon employees and the support received from a diverse group of employees. One notable employee described Amazon as a "really trans-friendly company," continuing that their manager had been a great advocate for them.⁶⁴ Directly including a testimonial from a trans employee helps Amazon establish brand credibility and trust with consumers, promoting a positive perception of the company and its inclusivity.

Additionally, Amazon has an 'Affinity Group' for its queer employees called Glamazon.⁶⁵ Glamazon has grown within the company since 2007, starting with just 30 employees and growing to over 3,000 in 2019.⁶⁶ Glamazon primarily focuses on Pride Month and employee activities but also arranges resources for queer employees such as the "transgender toolkit" which contains helpful information on medical benefits that may assist with transitioning as well as information to educate coworkers on mindfulness surrounding pronouns and

⁶³ Appendix 8

⁶⁴ Amazon. Amazon - Work Hard (2019)

⁶⁵ Amazon Staff. "A Look at Glamazon Through the Years."

⁶⁶ IBID

supporting others in their transition.⁶⁷ These benefits for employees and testimonials give credibility to Amazon's stance as an ally organization that values diversity, equity, and inclusion for its employees. Amazon even allows Glamazon to raise the LGBTQ+ Pride flag at its Seattle headquarters during Pride Month, a tradition that has occurred annually since 2017.⁶⁸

Although companies typically make political donations on all sides of the political spectrum to maintain a stance for potential political influence, it is important to note when they are actively making contributions that directly conflict with their public stance. Looking at political contributions made by Amazon in 2019, the company donated over \$1,300,000 to federal candidates.⁶⁹ Of these contributions, over \$450,000 went directly to politicians that voted against the same Equality Act that Amazon has signed and endorsed.⁷⁰ Despite working to keep a semi-neutral state for political influence, these contributions hold huge constituencies for the company's core values and efforts to support both their queer consumers and employees.

⁶⁷ Amazon Staff. "A Look at Glamazon Through the Years."

⁶⁸ IBID

⁶⁹ "Amazon.com PAC Contributions to Federal Candidates."

⁷⁰ Chalabi, Mona. "The Firms That Fund Anti-LGBTQ+ Politicians While Waving Rainbow Flag."

Analysis of Rainbow-Washing Companies

Based on the actions of AT&T, Verizon, Disney, and Amazon, each of these companies has exhibited rainbow-washing behavior. Despite appealing to LGBTQ+ audiences through advertisements and other products aimed directly towards them, these companies have demonstrated this through their actions that directly contradict any positive notions toward supporting or representing the community. As shown through this thesis, examples of rainbow-washing behavior can include making contradictory contributions toward politicians and legislature, using the rainbow flag solely for profit, and lacking true representation of the LGBTQ+ community in products or advertisements.

Rainbow-washing is extremely harmful to the LGBTQ+ community as it undermines the advocacy and respect that are necessary to authentic marketing. This behavior often leads to stereotyping or marginalization as queer individuals perceive that they are being exploited or used solely for marketing, creating more excluded feelings rather than the company's initial goal of inclusion. Rainbow-washing can also create issues for companies as consumers become aware of disingenuous campaigns and gain leeriness toward the company's public displays of support. The contradiction of authenticity damages accountability and transparency for companies, impacting public perception.

To retain a genuine and positive perception when marketing toward the LGBTQ+ community, it is imperative that companies utilize authentic marketing techniques and support their causes on all levels, including in private actions such as monetary contributions or endorsements. Just because a company has exhibited rainbow-washing behavior prior, they are not immune to change. Companies have the consistent opportunity to grow, adapt, and improve their work to be inclusive and genuine to all.

Next will be the companies that did not exhibit rainbow-washing behavior. These companies are Procter & Gamble, Google, and IKEA. Although IKEA was not identified as a leading national advertiser, its history with LGBTQ+-targeted marketing is a good basis to determine rainbow-washing behavior and proves as a good example for companies that seek to maintain authenticity in marketing.

Procter & Gamble

Procter & Gamble is a parent company of many brands in the personal care and hygiene industry and was ranked fourth in national advertising by AdAge, spending approximately \$4,281,000 on marketing in 2019.⁷¹ Procter & Gamble (P&G) received a 100 on the HRC's CEI scale and consistently prides itself on "championing LGBTQ+ visibility."^{72,73} Within its brands, these ideologies are replicated and shared with the public as a notion of P&G's emphasis on its values of being seen, heard, and proud.

Pantene and Gillette are just two of the many companies that fall under the umbrella of P&G. Pantene is a primarily women's hair product company and Gillette is known for their men's safety razors. Between the two companies and their distinct target markets, both have had great success in authentically representing and marketing the LGBTQ+ community.

In 2019, Gillette was a frontier for allyship and representation in the men's personal care industry. The company shared a commercial on its Facebook page during its "The Best a Man Can Get" campaign titled *First Shave, The Story Of Samson*.⁷⁴ The ad featured the true story of a transgender man and his first time shaving his facial hair while being taught by his father and

⁷¹ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

⁷² Human Rights Campaign. Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality.

⁷³ "Be Seen. Be Heard. Be Proud."

⁷⁴ Gillette. *Gillette - First Shave, the Story of Samson #MyBestSelf (P&G, 2019)*.

featured the tagline “Whenever, wherever, however it happens – your first shave is special.”^{75,76} This authentic representation and real testimonial style of advertisement is extremely important when marketing to the queer consumer segment. By including true stories and experiences, consumers can relate to those they see in commercials as well as build trust and loyalty with the company. Gillette also had a booth at Pride Island for WorldPride NYC in 2019, which its parent company P&G was a Platinum Sponsor of.^{77,78} However, rather than having rainbow-colored branded swag and other gimmicks, the company’s booth focused on its products and aimed to educate consumers, primarily transgender males, on products in a safe, welcoming environment.⁷⁹

Additionally, in the winter of 2019 Pantene released an ad campaign titled *Coming Home should be #BeautifulLGBTQ* in partnership with GLAAD, sharing support and awareness for LGBTQ+ travelers in the US during the holiday season.^{80,81} In one self-titled video from the campaign, the Trans Chorus of Los Angeles sings “I’ll be Home for Christmas” while statistics overlay, stating:

“137 million Americans will travel home this holiday season. But, 44% of LGBT+ people feel they can’t come home as their true selves, fearing their identity (including hair, makeup, and personal style) won’t be accepted. Let’s make the most wonderful time of year wonderful for all. Because no matter when you come home, where you call home, or who you come home to – coming home should be #BeautifulLGBTQ.”⁸²

⁷⁵ Gillette. *Gillette - First Shave, the Story of Samson #MyBestSelf* (P&G, 2019).

⁷⁶ Appendix 9

⁷⁷ Coleman, Lauren Delisa. “Here Are the Biggest Business Take-Aways from This Year’s WorldPride NYC.”

⁷⁸ Procter & Gamble. *2019 Citizenship Report - Diversity & Inclusion*.

⁷⁹ Appendix 10

⁸⁰ Appendix 11

⁸¹ Pantene. *Pantene - Coming Home Should Be #BeautifulLGBTQ* (P&G, 2019).

⁸² Verhoeven, Alfred. *Pantene*.

Although this commercial features shots of the hair of members of the choir, it primarily focuses on real-life obstacles faced by members of the LGBTQ+ community.⁸³ This commercial showed genuine support, raising awareness for the difficulties faced not only during the holiday season but year-round.

P&G also premiered a film titled “Out of The Shadows,” which the company states is meant to both highlight its LGBTQ+ workforce as well as explore the company’s continuous journey supporting the LGBTQ+ community.^{84,85} “Out of The Shadows” is a sequel to the 2018 film shared by the company titled “The Words Mattered” which focused on the company’s employees’ efforts to establish LGBTQ+ rights in the workforce.⁸⁶ As stated by P&G:

“This film celebrates the contributions those individuals made — often unrecognized — in changing the fabric of not only our workplace but our culture as a whole. Many companies around the world have gone through similar journeys and by telling our story, we hope to inspire others to stand up for what they believe in and create meaningful change.”⁸⁷

P&G is extremely open with its political contributions, having a section on its website that shares explicit information on who, what amount, and why they are donating annually.⁸⁸ In 2019, the company contributed \$205,800 to federal candidates, which were primarily positive for the LGBTQ+ community.⁸⁹ P&G has also received praise for its corporate governance, lobbying, and its extension of support to the LGBTQ+ community, with a note for their lobbying efforts as far back as 1993 against Cincinnati’s Article XII which would block any LGBTQ+ protection

⁸³ Procter & Gamble. *2019 Citizenship Report - Diversity & Inclusion*.

⁸⁴ Appendix 12

⁸⁵ Procter & Gamble. *Out of the Shadows: Risking Their Careers in the Name of Equality*.

⁸⁶ Procter & Gamble. *2019 Citizenship Report - Diversity & Inclusion*.

⁸⁷ IBID

⁸⁸ “P&G Political Involvement.”

⁸⁹ “The Procter & Gamble Company Good Government Fund.”

laws.⁹⁰ The transparency and accountability behind P&G’s contributions and actions continue to allow growth in the trust that consumers have in the company and good faith in the allyship and representation that P&G has for the LGBTQ+ community and consumers.

⁹⁰ Deighton, Katie. “As an LGBTQ+ Ally, P&G Is Navigating the Complexities of Operating in Anti-Gay Markets.”

Google

Popular internet search engine Google, owned by Alphabet Company, was ranked sixth for top national leading advertisers in 2019, having spent \$3,130,000 on advertisements.⁹¹ The company acts not only as a search engine, but also specializes in online advertising, cloud storage, artificial intelligence, and many other industries.⁹² Being the technological giant it is, Google has had its fair share of history in connecting with target consumers and effective marketing.

Google openly refers to its legacy of “pioneering” healthcare policies and early support for Pride celebrations.⁹³ Notably, the company showed its allyship early on and was a corporate sponsor in 2006 for multiple Pride festivals across the globe, including New York, Dublin, San Francisco, and Madrid, and has since only increased its corporate presence at Pride festivals.⁹⁴ Additionally, the company has an Employee Resource Group (ERG) titled “gayglers” that was established in 2003 as the first ERG of the company and acts as a community for queer Google employees.⁹⁵ In 2019, the company received a score of 100 on the HRC’s CEI for its equal health benefits and services for employees.⁹⁶

In 2019, Google utilized celebrity branding as its primary method of advertising to its queer consumers, specifically with popular rapper Lil Nas X. Lil Nas X is an artist well-known in the LGBTQ+ community for being a gay man and was the first openly black gay artist to win an award at the County Music Association awards in 2019.⁹⁷ Google featured the rapper in a series of advertisements in 2019, including the company’s annual *Year in Search*, the *Hum To*

⁹¹ AdAge. "Leading National Advertisers 2020 Fact Pack."

⁹² Google - about Google, Our Culture & Company News."

⁹³ "LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Workplace and beyond — Google."

⁹⁴ Verhoeven, Alfred. "Google."

⁹⁵ Jolly, Mohit. "What’s in a Name? How the Age-Old Question Helped Push Google’s Thinking around Inclusion."

⁹⁶ Human Rights Campaign. *Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality*.

⁹⁷ Pineda, Dorany. "Lil Nas X Makes History as First Openly Gay Black Artist to Win at CMA Awards."

Search campaign promoting new technology provided by the company, and *The Most Searched: A Celebration of Black History Makers*.^{98,99}

Celebrity endorsement is often recognized as a powerful marketing strategy, especially when used effectively. Having a queer celebrity such as Lil Nas X work with Google demonstrates the company's commitment to inclusivity and diversity, as well as establishing authenticity and reliability to gay consumers. This not only resonates with queer consumers but also attracts a wider audience who appreciates the brand's inclusive values. Ultimately, celebrity endorsement by a queer celebrity, such as Lil Nas X, provides a unique opportunity for brands to connect, engage, and build long-lasting relationships with queer consumers.

Google also engaged in collaborative marketing with clothing company Levi Strauss & Co., better known as Levi's, for the Levi's Trucker Jacket with Jacquard, a 'connected' coat made by Levi's that is interactive and able to be paired to personal devices.¹⁰⁰ In the ad shared by Levi's on Twitter, a gay couple is seen on a bike ride, enjoying their afternoon which has been enhanced by the interactive qualities provided by the Jacquard Trucker Jacket.^{101,102} Authentic marketing displays the gay couple in a montage of other groups of people as well normalizes gay relationships and shows the equality both Levi's and Google strive to achieve in their products.

Google also made financial strides for the LGBTQ+ community in 2019 with donations to groups such as the Trevor Project, a crisis and suicide intervention and prevention service for LGBTQ+ youth recognized previously for its connections with AT&T.¹⁰³ In 2019, the group

⁹⁸ Verhoeven, Alfred. "Google."

⁹⁹ Appendix 13

¹⁰⁰ "Levi's Trucker Jacket with Jacquard by Google."

¹⁰¹ @LEVIS. "Connected. Not Distracted."

¹⁰² Appendix 14

¹⁰³ "LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Workplace and beyond — Google."

won a \$1,500,000 grant from Google that would assist it in incorporating Google’s artificial intelligence (AI) technology into its suicide prevention services and better tailor assistance to each individual seeking help.¹⁰⁴ As for political contributions, Google has been transparent and clear stating they have:

“chosen not to use corporate resources to make independent expenditures or fund electioneering communications in support of, or opposition to a federal, state or local candidate’s election. In the future, if Google makes any direct independent expenditures, we would disclose such expenditures on this website and public campaign disclosure reports.”¹⁰⁵

The company does however operate a Political Action Committee, funded by employees’ personal donations, and a Board of Directors which makes decisions on donations and where funds should go.¹⁰⁶ These funds are minimal and have not negatively impacted the LGBTQ+ community.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzsimons, Tim. “Google, Trevor Project Will Use AI to Combat LGBTQ Youth Suicide.”

¹⁰⁵ “Transparency.”

¹⁰⁶ IBID

IKEA

Swedish furniture company IKEA has worked for over two decades to market to queer consumers, making historic landmarks along the way. In 1994, IKEA was the first company to air an advertisement with an openly gay couple on mainstream media in the US.¹⁰⁷ The 1994 commercial “Dining Room Table” features a gay couple sharing why they chose to shop at IKEA and what connection they have made in their relationship as a result, comparing the leaf in the table to a ‘new leaf’ in their relationship.^{108,109} Following the airing of this commercial, IKEA was met with extreme backlash ranging from boycotts to bomb threats.¹¹⁰ Despite the uproar, IKEA did not hesitate to continue to advertise toward and represent queer consumers in its advertisements. The company has shared many campaigns and efforts to market to this unique consumer segment and has paved the way for many other companies along the way.

In 2019, IKEA paired with National Geographic to create a ‘mockumentary’ style ad of two gay men sharing a small bed and buying a new one for better comfort in their relationship.¹¹¹ The collaborative commercial titled “Bedroom Habits” includes a nature-documentary style narration of the couple’s sleepless night in too small of a bed and the distress it has caused, leading the couple to go to IKEA for comfort and satisfaction.^{112,113} The authentic nature of this advertisement provides relatability for consumers, both in the LGBTQ+ community and not, as well as creates a light-hearted nature that is enjoyable to watch. The collaborative advertisement successfully represents the daily tribulations in a silly, yet effective matter that reaches consumers not because they are queer, but because they are human.

¹⁰⁷ Verhoeven, Alfred “IKEA.”

¹⁰⁸ IKEA. *IKEA - Dining Room Table (1994)*.

¹⁰⁹ Appendix 15

¹¹⁰ Horovitz, Bruce. “TV Commercial Featuring Gay Couple Creates a Madison Avenue Uproar.”

¹¹¹ National Geographic, IKEA. *The Small Bed Battle*

¹¹² IBID

¹¹³ Appendix 16

IKEA also made efforts to support the LGBTQ+ community in June 2019 by redesigning its *KVANTIG* shopping bag.¹¹⁴ Partnering with the educational branch of the HRC Foundation, the company re-designed its iconic blue and yellow tote bag into a limited-edition rainbow-colored bag.¹¹⁵ Rather than capitalizing on the rainbow during Pride Month, IKEA donated 100% of profits from the bag to the HRC and its programs supporting those in need in the LGBTQ+ community.¹¹⁶ All locations in the US also raised the Pride Flag on June 1st, 2019 to commemorate the beginning of Pride Month and show support for their LGBTQ+ shoppers and employees.¹¹⁷

Alongside the company's fundraising with the HRC, it also is a member of the Business Coalition for Equality Act and received a 100 on the CEI.^{118,119} In 2019, IKEA expressed its commitment to providing for its LGBTQ+ employees, including coverage of gender-affirming surgeries and counseling.¹²⁰ This dedication to LGBTQ+ consumers and employees has made IKEA a leader in advertising to the queer consumer segment as well as an affirmed ally. The company's representation and dedication extend past the desire for profit and allows an authentic, reliable connection between the consumer and the company.

¹¹⁴ Appendix 17

¹¹⁵ "IKEA U.S. Unveils Rainbow Shopping Bag - Newsroom."

¹¹⁶ IBID

¹¹⁷ IBID

¹¹⁸ Berg-Brousseau, Henry. "200+ Major U.s. Companies Oppose Anti-LGBTQ+ State Legislation."

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Campaign. Corporate Equality Index 2019: Building a Bridge to LGBTQ Equality.

¹²⁰ "IKEA U.S. Unveils Rainbow Shopping Bag - Newsroom."

Analysis of Companies Engaging in Authentic Marketing

As explored through this project, Procter & Gamble, Google, and IKEA have successfully exhibited authentic marketing tactics and acted as allies for the LGBTQ+ consumer base. Companies that consistently utilize and maintain their position with authentic marketing and representation of the LGBTQ+ community can promote inclusivity, strengthen relationships with their consumer base, and have a positive social impact as a result.

The authenticity in company actions can present itself through collaborations with LGBTQ+ organizations, charitable donations, and representing queer individuals without tokenizing them or giving into harmful stereotypes. These actions hold a meaningful impact on the LGBTQ+ community and increase consumer trust and brand loyalty. Additionally, authentic companies can expand their markets to the extensive consumer base of the LGBTQ+ community and gain a competitive advantage against others in the industry that may come off as disingenuous and exhibit rainbow-washing behavior.

Moreover, companies that engage in authentic marketing reflect their support to the public and their employees. As seen with P&G, Google, and IKEA, companies that engage in authentic advocacy typically have equal, personalized medical benefits for their LGBTQ+ employees that set them apart from other employers. This support increases employee satisfaction, boosting morale and improving the company's work environment, ultimately benefiting the company altogether. By being an ally on all-levels, companies can set a new precedent within their industries and create a better societal expectation for the treatment of LGBTQ+ consumers and employees. The pioneering of authentic marketing allows companies that have previously engaged in rainbow-washing to follow their example and spread representation and advocacy across the market in a respectful, non-harmful way.

Conclusion

With the size and magnitude of the LGBTQ+ consumer segment, it is essential that companies work to best find ways to gain the segments purchase power. The increase in targeting this segment has sparked controversy about the authenticity of marketing efforts towards the LGBTQ+ community. The solution to this debate comes down to the actions taken by companies and whether they prove to be authentic or if they exhibit rainbow-washing behaviors. Understanding the differences between these approaches and their respective benefits is essential for businesses seeking to engage with the LGBTQ+ market and understanding their motives.

As companies reveal their true colors, it has become clear that authentic marketing holds the greatest impact for consumers, companies, and the economy overall. The representation and advocacy for LGBTQ+ consumers should act as a baseline for companies seeking to engage with them in the market as well as seeking to diversify their base.

Companies that engage in rainbow-washing profit off of the LGBTQ+ community without having true advocacy or benefit for those involved. Examples of rainbow-washing were best displayed by AT&T, Verizon Communications, Walt Disney Company, and Amazon as explored by their advertisements and contradictory actions in the year 2019. Despite efforts to represent and appeal to the queer community through marketing, these contradictions are disrespectful and shallow, creating a negative response from consumers. Companies engaging in rainbow-washing typically focus on the desire for increased capitalization on the growing demand for LGBT-friendly products or targeting the LGBTQ+ consumer segment. This type of engagement is extremely harmful and trivializing for the LGBTQ+ community and their experiences and often results in backlash from the public.

On the other hand, authentic marketing involves genuine and meaningful involvement with the LGBTQ+ community, including consistent effort to represent, support, and advocate for queer individuals and their rights. Procter & Gamble, Google, and IKEA have shown great examples of authenticity within their motives and have had success when connecting with the targeted consumer base. The prioritization of authenticity allows companies to embrace a genuine relationship with the LGBTQ+ community, impacting trust, loyalty, and brand perception.

In order to truly connect with the LGBTQ+ community, it is imperative for companies to shift their focus from quick, profitable actions and take all aspects into consideration when creating products and advertisements. By utilizing authenticity, companies can foster inclusivity, build meaningful relationships, and have a positive social impact. Each of these aspects positively improves conditions within the LGBTQ+ market and allow for the demand for authenticity, advocacy, and support. The power held by corporations and their ability to influence politicians as well as regular citizens should be utilized to benefit society as a whole rather than focusing on greed and the need for profit. Companies such as P&G, Google, and IKEA have set a great precedent for those in their respective industries and should continue to be followed for their great impacts on the LGBTQ+ community.

Appendix

Appendix 1 – AT&T Pride Float, 2019



Source: Averdick, Dave. "The First Weekend of Pride."

Appendix 2 - #TurnUpTheLoveSalon Examples of Looks, 2019



Source: Averdick, Dave. "The First Weekend of Pride."

Appendix 3 – AT&T “Babysitter” Commercial, 2019



Source: OK is not OK - Babysitter

Appendix 4 – Verizon “Love Calls Back” Commercial, 2019



Source: “Love Calls Back.”

Appendix 5 – Rainbow Disney Collection Product Examples, 2019



Source: Block, Tara. “Rainbow Disney Pride 2019 Collection.”

Appendix 6 – Rainbow Disney Treats, 2019



Source: Inigo, Joey. “Disneyland Resort Launches Rainbow Treats, Merch for GAY DAYS 2019 Weekend.”

Appendix 7 – Amazon “Happy Holidays” Commercial, 2019



Source: Amazon. Amazon - Happy Holidays (2019)

Appendix 8 – Amazon “Work Hard” Commercial, 2019



Source: Amazon. Amazon - Work Hard (2019)

Appendix 9 – Gillette “The Story of Samson” Commercial, 2019



Source: Gillette. *Gillette - First Shave, the Story of Samson #MyBestSelf* (P&G, 2019).

Appendix 10 – Gillette WorldPride NYC Booth, 2019



Source: Coleman, Lauren Delisa. “Here Are the Biggest Business Take-Aways from This Year’s WorldPride NYC.”

Appendix 11 – Pantene “Coming Home should be #BeautifulLGBTQ” Commercial, 2019



Source: Pantene. Pantene - Coming Home Should Be #BeautifulLGBTQ (P&G, 2019).

Appendix 12 – Procter & Gamble “Out of the Shadows” Documentary, 2019



Source: Procter & Gamble. Out of the Shadows: Risking Their Careers in the Name of Equality.

Appendix 13 – Google “Hum To Search” Commercial, 2019



Source: Google TV Spot, “Hum to Search: Old Town Road”

Appendix 14 – Google and Levi’s “Connected. Not Distracted” Commercial, 2019



Source: @LEVIS. “Connected. Not Distracted.”

Appendix 15 – IKEA, “Dining Room Table” Commercial, 1994



Source: IKEA. *IKEA - Dining Room Table* (1994).

Appendix 16 – IKEA and National Geographic “The Small Bed Battle” Commercial, 2019



Source: National Geographic, IKEA. *The Small Bed Battle*

Appendix 17 – IKEA “KVANTIG” Shopping Bag, 2019



Source: “IKEA U.S. Unveils Rainbow Shopping Bag - Newsroom.”

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