ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue VI, June 2025

LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Advertising and Brand Loyalty: A Cross-Cultural Study of Gen Z Consumers

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.140600023

Received: 17 June 2025; Accepted: 18 June 2025; Published: 05 July 2025

Abstract: This paper explores the influence of LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others) representation in advertising on brand loyalty among Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers across various cultural contexts. Using a secondary research methodology, the study synthesizes insights from academic literature, marketing reports, and brand case studies to examine how inclusivity in brand messaging impacts Gen Z's purchasing behavior and brand affiliation. Findings highlight that authentic representation fosters emotional engagement and long-term brand loyalty, while performative allyship often leads to backlash and reputational damage. The research also emphasizes the role of cultural sensitivity in shaping consumer perceptions, particularly in regions where LGBTQ+ topics remain contentious. Ultimately, this paper argues that inclusive branding, when implemented with sincerity and consistency, is not only ethically significant but also a strategic imperative for businesses seeking sustained relationships with Gen Z consumers worldwide.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ inclusivity, advertising, brand loyalty, Generation Z, inclusive marketing, cross-cultural study, consumer behavior, identity-based branding.

I. Introduction

The increasing visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in mainstream culture have significantly influenced advertising strategies across the globe. Brands are progressively integrating LGBTQ+ representation into their campaigns, aiming to reflect diversity and promote inclusivity. This transformation is particularly relevant in the context of Generation Z (Gen Z), a demographic group born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, characterized by digital fluency, progressive social values, and heightened awareness of identity and representation. For Gen Z, advertising is not merely about product promotion - it is a reflection of a brand's values, societal engagement, and ethical stance.

As a result, LGBTQ+ representation in advertising has evolved from a niche marketing tactic to a broader indicator of corporate social responsibility and cultural relevance. This generation, more than any before, evaluates brands based on their alignment with social justice causes, including LGBTQ+ rights. Representation in advertising, when perceived as genuine and affirming, can cultivate emotional bonds and long-term brand loyalty. Conversely, disingenuous or performative allyship may trigger consumer backlash and distrust.

However, the authenticity of such representation remains under scrutiny. While some brands have earned praise for consistent support and inclusive narratives, others have faced criticism for tokenistic portrayals or rainbow-washing (a practice where brands use LGBTQ+ symbols for marketing purposes without genuine support or follow-through, leading to skepticism and backlash). The stakes are high, especially in an era where social media amplifies consumer voices and holds brands publicly accountable. Moreover, the impact of LGBTQ+ inclusivity varies across cultural contexts, where differing societal norms, legal frameworks, and levels of LGBTQ+ acceptance influence how such content is received.

This paper aims to investigate how LGBTQ+ representation in advertising influences brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers across different cultural settings. Through an analysis of existing literature and marketing case studies, the study explores the conditions under which representation fosters meaningful brand relationships and when it risks being dismissed as insincere. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on inclusive branding and offer strategic insights for marketers seeking to engage Gen Z through culturally sensitive and values-driven campaigns.

II. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, secondary research methodology to investigate the impact of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in advertising on brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers across cultural contexts. Given the scope of the research and the limitations associated with conducting large-scale primary data collection for a cross-cultural audience, this approach enables the synthesis of diverse insights from existing literature, industry reports, and global marketing case studies.

The research follows a thematic review design, where peer-reviewed journal articles, white papers, media analyses, and industry insights were analyzed to identify recurring patterns, arguments, and trends related to LGBTQ+ representation in marketing and its effects on Gen Z consumer behavior. The focus was on identifying connections between three key constructs: LGBTQ+ inclusion in advertising, brand authenticity and consumer perception, and brand loyalty among Gen Z in different cultural environments.

Sources were selected based on relevance, recency (2010–2024), and academic or industry credibility. Databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest were used to retrieve scholarly articles. Additional insights were drawn from

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue VI, June 2025

marketing consultancy reports (e.g., McKinsey, Edelman, GLAAD) and credible media outlets. Only sources written in English and relevant to the intersection of LGBTQ+ marketing, Gen Z consumers, and brand loyalty were included.

This study is limited by the nature of secondary data, which may not fully capture the nuances of rapidly evolving consumer attitudes in every cultural context. Additionally, the absence of direct primary data from Gen Z consumers reduces the ability to make statistically generalizable claims. However, by triangulating existing research, the study offers a well-supported, theoretically grounded analysis of emerging trends.

III. Findings and Discussion

This section presents key findings based on secondary research, highlighting how LGBTQ+ representation in advertising influences brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers across cultures.

Authenticity Drives Emotional Connection

Authenticity has emerged as a pivotal theme in the evaluation of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising. Research indicates that Gen Z consumers are increasingly attuned to the sincerity of brand messaging, especially in relation to social causes such as LGBTQ+ inclusion. According to Edelman (2022), over 60% of Gen Z consumers believe that brands should take a stand on social issues, but nearly half of them are skeptical of the motives behind such advocacy. This duality underscores the importance of genuine, value-driven messaging over superficial or trend-based marketing.

Authentic representation often entails the use of real stories, involvement of LGBTQ+ individuals in the creative process, and a commitment to representation beyond seasonal campaigns. Brands like Levi's and Absolut have consistently integrated LGBTQ+ narratives throughout their advertising history, earning the trust and admiration of Gen Z audiences. On the contrary, brands that only adopt LGBTQ+ themes during Pride Month or resort to stereotypical imagery risk being labeled as opportunistic, which can harm their brand perception.

Brand Loyalty Linked to Shared Values

Brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers is not driven solely by product quality or pricing - it is increasingly anchored in value alignment. This generation tends to support brands that mirror their views on diversity, equity, and inclusion. A 2021 report by GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) revealed that 77% of Gen Z respondents are more likely to purchase from companies that demonstrate support for LGBTQ+ rights. These findings suggest that inclusive advertising is not just good ethics - it's good business.

The emotional connection fostered by values-based marketing translates into repeat purchases, advocacy, and brand ambassadorship. Consumers feel seen and respected when brands affirm their identity through inclusive imagery and messaging. This emotional resonance enhances brand recall and promotes a sense of community between the consumer and the company.

However, value-based loyalty is a double-edged sword. Gen Z's hyper-awareness of performative marketing means that missteps in representation - such as lack of diversity in leadership or failure to act on internal equity issues - can lead to boycotts or public criticism. Thus, inclusive messaging must be backed by authentic practices to sustain loyalty.

Cultural Context Modifies Reception

The cultural relativity of LGBTQ+ representation cannot be overstated. What is celebrated as progressive in one country may provoke backlash in another due to differing legal systems, religious doctrines, or societal norms. For instance, in Western liberal democracies such as Canada, Sweden, and the Netherlands, LGBTQ+ inclusion is widely accepted and often expected. Brands operating in these contexts are incentivized to adopt progressive messaging to align with the cultural zeitgeist.

In contrast, countries with conservative or authoritarian leanings may impose restrictions on LGBTQ+ inclusivity. In markets such as Russia, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, brands often have to walk a fine line between inclusivity and compliance with local censorship laws or societal expectations. This presents a unique challenge for multinational companies aiming to maintain a consistent global identity while adapting to local sensibilities.

Interestingly, even within conservative environments, Gen Z consumers are increasingly open to LGBTQ+ representation. The internet and social media have globalized cultural exchange, allowing younger generations to access progressive content from other regions. This creates pockets of demand for inclusive advertising, even where societal norms are traditionally less accepting.

Long-Term Impact on Brand Equity

Inclusive advertising contributes to the broader construct of brand equity. Beyond immediate engagement metrics such as likes or shares, LGBTQ+ representation enhances how a brand is perceived over time. When consumers view a brand as progressive and inclusive, they are more likely to attribute other positive qualities to it - such as innovation, trustworthiness, and leadership. This halo effect strengthens the brand's market position and customer lifetime value.

Moreover, brands that integrate inclusion into their core identity benefit from sustained competitive advantage. For example, Ben & Jerry's has embedded social justice into its corporate mission, including consistent support for LGBTQ+ causes. This

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue VI, June 2025

integration is reflected not just in their ads but in their corporate partnerships, hiring practices, and community engagement strategies. The result is a brand that resonates deeply with values-driven consumers and maintains relevance across generations.

Conversely, superficial or inconsistent representation can erode brand equity. A mismatch between advertising and actual business practices can lead to consumer skepticism and disengagement. As Gen Z consumers increasingly use social media to scrutinize brands, transparency and accountability become critical to sustaining loyalty and credibility.

The Role of Digital Media in Amplifying LGBTQ+ Representation

Digital media platforms have significantly influenced the reach and impact of LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising. Social media, in particular, serves as both a distribution channel and a space for discourse. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter enable brands to directly engage with Gen Z audiences and receive immediate feedback on their campaigns. This interactivity creates opportunities for dialogue, community building, and co-creation of content with LGBTQ+ individuals.

Hashtag campaigns, user-generated content, and influencer partnerships are common strategies used to enhance visibility and relatability. Brands like Fenty Beauty and Skittles have effectively employed these tactics to elevate LGBTQ+ voices and promote inclusive messaging. However, the viral nature of social media also means that insincere efforts can backfire quickly, often becoming subjects of online ridicule or boycott movements.

Ultimately, digital media empowers consumers to shape brand narratives. Gen Z users expect brands to listen, respond, and evolve in real-time. For LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising to succeed in this environment, it must be grounded in authenticity, backed by action, and adaptable to the nuances of digital culture.

IV. Conclusion and Implications

This study has explored the impact of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising on brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers across different cultural contexts. Through a secondary research approach, key themes emerged around authenticity, values-based marketing, cultural adaptation, and long-term brand equity. The findings suggest that inclusive advertising, when executed with sincerity and consistency, can significantly enhance emotional connection and loyalty among Gen Z consumers - arguably the most socially aware and digitally connected generation to date.

Authenticity is the cornerstone of effective LGBTQ+ representation. Gen Z is not impressed by surface-level gestures; instead, they seek alignment between a brand's messaging, internal policies, and long-term actions. When representation is perceived as performative or opportunistic, it can lead to negative backlash and erosion of trust.

The role of culture is equally crucial. As brands navigate global markets, they must consider the social, legal, and religious norms that shape perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusion. A flexible yet principled approach - one that localizes content while remaining committed to core inclusive values - can help brands avoid alienating stakeholders in sensitive regions. In a world where social justice, digital accountability, and consumer identity increasingly intersect, LGBTQ+ representation in advertising has become a litmus test for brand credibility. Marketers, brand strategists, and global advertisers must treat it not as a seasonal opportunity but as a sustained commitment - embedded in storytelling, hiring practices, corporate policy, and brand values.

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