

Question1: When will advertising embrace diversity, gender and race equality, and start reflecting the real world? Critically discuss and respond.

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Course title: Graphic design BA

Word count: 2308

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Diversity in advertising should be something everyone should expect, right?

With the world being such a cosmopolitan place it's almost humorous to think advertising, a media targeted at people and the human experience, could be so one sided. Representation in the media matters now more than ever, with the influx of social media platforms coming into play over the past decade its heavily important for customers to see themselves in advertising. Not only does it benefit the customer but also the supplier. Feeling unseen or dismissed is a common experience for many people with diversities, from gender to race to age etc. Like most things in life, advertising was targeted and suited for the white, straight, male throughout the 20th century and early 21st. With the breadth of this discussion, this essay will primarily focus on the discrimination and lack of diversity in advertising towards sexuality and delve into the regression and progression of the craft.

Advertising throughout the 20th century followed the pattern of tending to the White, straight, males of society as of course those were the primary consumers for the time. Post war advertising played a huge role in this pattern, as the country was

in shambles, advertising companies found ways to gain traction in magazines and propaganda. One magazine was 'good housekeeping', a magazine focusing on beauty and health tips, rationing advice and household information. This magazine was targeted towards the nuclear family which would've been a white household of



Figure 1: 7-UP advertisement (1949)

four, one man one woman and two children, one boy one girl. With a reader “median age of 52” (Good Housekeeping, 2014 pg 44) This image of the nuclear family only reinforced that that was the standard of living for the time. Not being able to see yourself in the media as a queer person, you'd find yourself feeling invisible. On the flip side of this, there were some companies making a stance and supporting the LGBTQ+ community, one example would be Absolut vodka. In 1981 they placed an advertisement in a gay magazine called 'The advocate'. This was also a full page

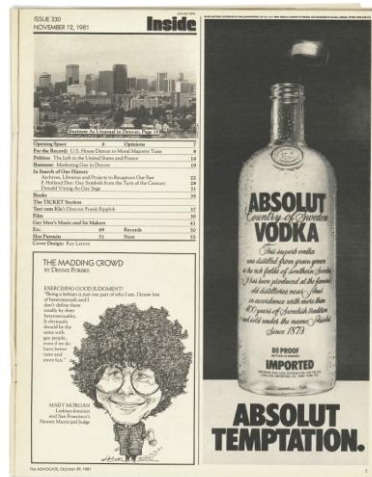


Figure 2: Absolut vodka

advert, so they had committed
advertising (1981)

to publishing this advert to target and appreciate their gay audience. According to Marketingtherainbow (2022) “They featured the same ads they used in ‘straight’ publications” highlighting the authenticity behind the brand. With an influx of advertisements depicting the assumed normality that heterosexuality was “normal” The article named ‘Queervvertising’ states “Gay men and lesbians are made invisible, being a taboo subject” (iglesias-sanches et al, 2023) around the 1960’s. Companies feared the political and social implications of showing anyone diverse, especially gay people as “Publishers, advertisers and those companies promoting their products have a vested interest in not ‘rocking the boat’” (Marshall, d 2022. Pg 44) This lack of acknowledgement for a whole community further supresses and represses them into history. This repression isn't all down to the companies however, advertising is a two way street as “advertisers influence society and changes in society influence

advertisers" (Melnyk, V. 2021), companies benefit off feedback and reports from customers to then

alter and create more targeted adverts. Statistics surrounding anyone with a diversity wasn't a common thing in the 20th century, the research into people with diversities

will forever continue to grow larger and has done over the last few decades. A more recent study provided by Glaads annual advertising index stated that "only 3% of national linear TV ads from the top ten spending brands were inclusive" in the US.

This was 3% of 400 advertisements published by these companies. Further implying the resistance to be inclusive for a fear of the societal implications. Another recent example of what reinforces companies to stay passive is the John Lewis: Let it happen advert. This advert was a home insurance advert that depicted a young boy playing in his mother's clothes and makeup, dancing around the house listening to a Stevie nicks song while trashing the house, a creative, colourful and engaging advertisement. The advert was later pulled from streaming after complaints from viewers grew overwhelming. Regulators state it was pulled due to a misinterpretation that people may think the insurance covers damage done by your child. However other complaints had a more homophobic undertone, and one man stated the advert "as representing a terrifying snapshot of all that's wrong with Britain right now"

(Rawlinson, K. 2021) The question stands that if it were a young girl playing in her mother's clothes and makeup doing the exact same thing, would it have been pulled? The parallel between these two instances shows how companies are put in a difficult situation. An insight into why these adverts would have been targeted towards the white, straight demographic would have been because the creative teams were marginally the same. The AMA (American marketing association) state that "social norms influence various forms of everyday consumption, including food choices, responses to new products, and loyalty." (McDonald, R.E et al 2020) reinforcing how the cycle of white, straight men producing advertising that reiterates the social norms of previous advertisements, with the same message, that then influences advertisements and social norms for the ongoing future, is an issue. This repetitive cycle must be broken to achieve any actual change. According to the All in Census, with 19,000 respondents from marketing companies, there is a severe lack in diversity in creative teams. For example, the percentage of black people in the United Kingdom was 3% out of nineteen thousand respondents, 8% for Asian workers, 2% for mixed race and 14% for any other minority included. These statistics firmly highlight the lack of diversity within the profession, reinforcing how advertising is not reflecting the real world authentically.

In the present day, advertising has changed fundamentally. We are seeing a rise in diversity throughout advertisement, but is it enough? A positive that has come with changes in society is that companies and brands are understanding the importance of everyone's voice. Glaads 2024 visibility perceptions in advertising report found that “90% of the industry says it’s very important to feature the LGBTQ community in advertising” (GLAAD ,2024) showing progression is being made.

Another survey by the ANA found that “55 percent of advertisers engage in LGBTQ+-inclusive marketing.” (Ana.net. 2024). Now these statistics appear well on paper but are there any actual instances where companies are sticking to their word. An example of this progression comes from the brand Levi’s, In 2024 they released a pride collection

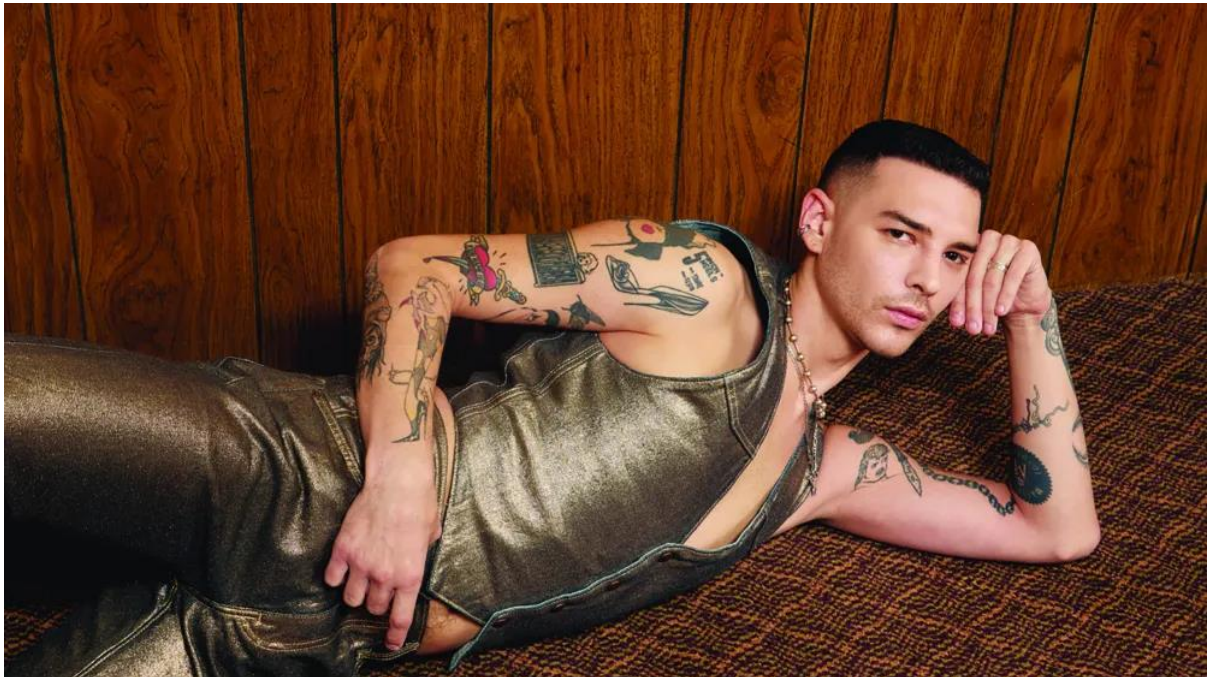


Figure 3: Looks from levis' 2024 pride collection (2024)

named 'Rodeo Glamour', this collection included cowboy and western themed denim pieces brought out during pride. The authenticity of this advertising comes from the routed history in gay culture that was presented in the collection. The collection relates back to the LGBTQ+ rodeo culture in the 1970s. Other examples would be Absolut vodka, relating back to my previous paragraph, Absolut vodka was the first company to ever publish an advertisement into a gay magazine, they've since continued their allyship all the way into the 21st century, providing real, authentic dedication to catering to all of their customers. Another example of Absolut's persistence is their "No Labels bottle in 2009, as a tribute to a world where everyone can be who they are without labels" (Absolut, 2025) This act of allyship was even a large statement for 2009, as gay marriage wasn't even legalised until March of 2014. Really makes you think about how LGBTQ+ people have only been able to be married, a tradition that we believe to be around 4,350 years old (The Week (2015), for 11 years. 0.25% of that time. How this contrasts to the 1950's and up is how there isn't a blanket thrown over advertisement covering visuals of LGBTQ+ people, people of colour, differently abled people etc. The differences in who we see on our screens now vs the 1950's, We're now seeing same sex couples, transgender people, and different family structures representing everyone. While we're seeing companies embrace and express their support for showing diversities and presenting a more authentic picture of the world, there are some companies that reduced their

visible pride support. The whole meaning of pride is to support the uprising of stonewall the origin and catapult into the gay rights movement after a violent police raid in a gay bar in 1969. "The uprising at the Stonewall Inn in June 1969 is widely considered a turning point in the modern fight for LGBTQ rights" (Salam, M. 2019)

This highlights how progress can be made but is not always equal across the board.

What has aided in the progression of diversity in advertising has been social media.

Due to the rise of different platforms and the age of digital content being so prominent right now, advertising has changed once again from physical media to televised adverts to now digital content. This allows brands to reach a wider audience with ease. An example of a brand utilising social media is



Figure 4: For the love of love

(2025)

Bumble. The advert was titled "Love for all", it was a series of interviews with queer, and transgender daters on their experience with dating, relationships, and self acceptance. This intimate and simplistic advert creates a warm and refreshing perspective on dating that outdates outdated views on the matter. As an online brand it makes perfect sense for them to utilise this platform and further highlights social medias impact. Another way social media has been a tool for societal change has been young people holding companies and corporations accountable for their lack of diversity or ignorance towards the matter. An example of this was Skittles marketing campaign for pride of 2023, they released a packaging of all grey, and proceeds were donated to LGBTQ+ charities. This campaign later backfired and caused some noise within social media. The campaign was seen as not authentic and not backed by a long term support from the brand. On the flip side, a campaign from bud light with a transgender woman named Dylan Mulvaney received backlash from consumers on a large scale over social media. However, there were a mass of people on social media platforms coming to the brands rescue in support of the campaign, this highlights how social media aids in the societal change of advertising in being more authentic in diversity and not doing it just for clicks.

Although progression in diversity in advertising has come a long way over the last few decades, there is still a long way to go. This section of the essay i wanted to

talk about what actions can be done by corporations and brands to further push the diversity featured in advertising to accurately depict the real world. The first thing would be to increase the amount of diverse people in creative teams. The backlash involved with advertisements lacking authenticity and integrity usually comes from a lack of first hand experiences in the creative team. A statement from a research study showed that “based on interviews with advertising executives, found that advertisers are concerned with backlash from the community when inclusion misses the mark” (Businesswire. 2021) further enforcing the need for diversity in the creative industries. An example of a step in the right direction comes from P&G advertising

company starting a visibility project, “Phase one of The Visibility Project will focus on recruiting Fortune 100 advertisers to sign on as partners and collaborate on a blueprint for LGBTQ inclusion in advertising that ensures brands and companies prioritize impact, as well as accurate and authentic representation” (Businesswire. 2021) highlighting how there are corporations doing their bit to further push the battle of inclusion in advertising. The resistance against this progression comes from a multitude of things, companies are sadly issuing less inclusive advertising when hit with backlash from consumers with outdated views. There’s also the issue I’ve mentioned heavily throughout this essay which is authenticity, the true way to overcome this is to hire queer people for queer points of view, the queer experience

isn't something to be fabricated or created on a guessing basis, it needs to be authentic and consumers can tell when it is not, as shown by previous examples in this essay.

Advertising has progressed heavily throughout time, from the era of the nuclear family being so present in the everyday media as well as heterosexuality being pushed as the norm for society. We've come a long way from rather tunnel visioned advertising and progressing through to a more open range and colourful world. With help from brands such as Absolut and Levi's showing an early dedication to providing support to all. As evident in this essay, progress is still needed throughout the market. Consumers can see inauthenticity and if what's behind the camera accurately depicts what then goes in front of it. Brands such as Bumble are paving the way for other brands to participate in showing diversity within their marketing. The praise these adverts get on social media also is a tool to be used, this praise can heavily influence brands to follow along. Relating back to my initial paragraph, Advertising influences society and society influences advertising, the more we continue to grow and accept each other in society, the more we will see it on our screens, as real life.

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