

Exploring LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity: A qualitative entity-referent correspondence study



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Orientation: This research contributes a novel methodological approach by examining LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity through the lens of a psychological theory.

Research purpose: This research employs the entity-referent correspondence framework to evaluate alignment between marketing representations and community realities.

Motivation for the study: Specialised communities such as LGBTQ+ consumers challenge conventional authenticity frameworks, requiring marketers to develop a more nuanced understanding of how these distinct groups perceive and evaluate brand genuineness through their unique cultural lenses.

Research design, approach and method: The study conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis on data from 15 online interviews with LGBTQ+ community members. This methodology employed sequential interpretation and abstraction processes to identify patterns and extract core meanings from participant experiences. The findings were synthesised into an interpretive narrative framework representing participants' lived experiences.

Main findings: The findings indicate that LGBTQ+ community members feel excluded and have developed independent coping mechanisms in response.

Practical/managerial implications: To achieve authentic representation and avoid tokenistic approaches, marketing professionals should establish direct collaborative partnerships with LGBTQ+ community members to co-develop meaningful marketing strategies.

Contribution/value-add: This research breaks new ground by being the first to apply the entity-referent correspondence framework to determine LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity. The research uncovers a significant population gap beyond its initial scope, raising fundamental questions about authentic marketing representation within underserved demographic segments.

Keywords: entity-referent correspondence framework; LGBTQ+ marketing; marketing authenticity; interpretive phenomenological analysis; interpretive narrative.

Introduction

LGBTQ+ marketing succeeds only through authentic representation and community engagement. This represents a significant shift in how brands approach diverse consumer communities. As society has grown more inclusive and LGBTQ+ identities have gained mainstream visibility, marketers increasingly recognise the importance of authentic, respectful engagement. This shift transcends simple advertising representation, requiring deep understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences, values and perspectives (Fish et al. 2022).

LGBTQ+ consumers demonstrate strong engagement with brands aligning with their identities. Consumer innovativeness and personal identity significantly influence engagement and attitudes. This alignment between claimed identity and actual practice proves crucial for building lasting relationships with LGBTQ+ consumers, who often possess heightened awareness of tokenistic or inauthentic marketing efforts. When brands achieve authenticity, they build trust with LGBTQ+ communities while contributing to broader social acceptance and understanding (Coetzee, De Villiers & Chuchu 2023).

Pirani and Daskalopoulou (2022) suggested further research examining how LGBTQ+ marketing influences human psychology and creates perceived failure patterns, and how these practices simultaneously provide and disrupt identity and meaning. Moulard, Raggio and Folse (2021)

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highlighted challenges in modern marketing where different consumer communities often hold fundamentally different, sometimes conflicting ideals.

Despite increasing recognition of authenticity's importance in marketing communication, research lags in understanding the concept's nature and measurement development, particularly regarding historically marginalised populations (Lim, Moon & Ciszek 2024). Organisations should employ essential metrics to evaluate their marketing authenticity to these segments (Chatzopoulou, Poulis & Giovanis 2024). This diversity in consumer values creates complex landscapes where traditional one-size-fits-all approaches become ineffective.

Marketing authenticity research across diverse consumer communities unveils a paradoxical landscape of competing truths and conflicting perceptions. While marketing researchers consistently emphasise the importance of authenticity, they often approach it from different angles and with varying definitions. For instance, Gilmore and Pine (2007:258) highlighted authenticity as a fundamental consumer demand, suggesting it represents 'what consumers truly seek in their brand interactions'. Euromonitor International's 2019 market analysis identified the pursuit of authenticity as one of the 20 significant trends expected to shape consumer markets through 2030. Interbrand (2018) integrated authenticity as a key metric in its methodology for ranking the world's top 100 global brands. In their 2010 research, Beverland (2010) and Farrelly noted that brand authenticity encompasses multiple interpretations and meanings. The challenge lies in identifying these various meanings and agreeing about their number, nature and implications for marketing practice. This lack of consensus becomes particularly significant when examining how authenticity manifests within specialist communities (e.g. LGBTQ+), where standard definitions may not adequately capture the nuanced expectations and interpretations of specific consumer groups.

This study used the entity-referent correspondence (ERC) (Moulard et al. 2021) framework to examine the relationship between what a brand claims to be (the entity) and how it manifests in its actions and communications (the referent). In the context of LGBTQ+ marketing, this means analysing whether a brand's stated support for LGBTQ+ communities aligns with its actual practices – from its internal policies to its external messaging. For example, when a brand creates LGBTQ+ inclusive advertising, the ERC framework helps evaluate whether the representation feels genuine to the communities. Does the advertising reflect real LGBTQ+ experiences and perspectives? Are the portrayals based on authentic understanding rather than stereotypes? Is the brand's support consistent and continuous? These questions help determine if there's true correspondence between a brand's claimed support for LGBTQ+ communities and its actual engagement with them.

This study adopts the ERC authenticity framework proposed by Moulard et al. (2021) as the research framework. Therefore, through an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA),

this study aimed to explore the authenticity of LGBTQ+ marketing. To narrow the focus of the aim, more inquiries were made, namely:

- To investigate the true-to-ideal (TTI) authenticity of LGBTQ+ marketing.
- To analyse the true-to-fact (TTF) authenticity of LGBTQ+ marketing.
- To evaluate the true-to-self (TTS) authenticity of LGBTQ+ marketing.

The practical and theoretical implications of this study are significant. From a practical standpoint, the research illuminates how the LGBTQ+ communities cope with being 'left out'. They have developed their own coping mechanisms to deal with inauthentic marketing. This study contributes to the academic knowledge of authentic marketing with special reference to the LGBTQ+ communities in South Africa. By understanding these coping strategies, marketing managers can increase the effectiveness of authentic marketing. Moreover, to avoid tokenism and stereotypes, marketing managers and the LGBTQ+ communities should agree on clear collaborative guidelines addressing community diversity. The theoretical contribution is particularly noteworthy because of the unprecedented application of ERC within LGBTQ+ marketing. This novel intersection of psychological theory and marketing has revealed a critical gap in existing literature. Most significantly, a population gap emerged organically during the data analysis phase, expanding the study's impact beyond its initial scope. Consequently, the research serves a dual purpose: it provides immediate practical insights for marketing managers, while advancing theoretical understanding of LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity.

An IPA was employed as the research methodology, and the results were presented as an interpretative narrative. The researcher interpreted the participants' lived experiences, while offering an integrated account of the research topic. Following the introduction, the literature review provides context to the research purpose. Thereafter, the research methodology, findings, limitations and managerial implications are presented.

Literature review

The terms queer and LGBTQ+ are often used interchangeably in literature. Queer is frequently used as an umbrella term that can encompass a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities, including those not specifically mentioned in the LGBTQ+ acronym (Goldberg et al. 2020). LGBTQ+ is a more structured acronym that explicitly includes specific identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning, along with others represented by the '+' (Macapagal, Bhatia & Greene 2016). This study uses LGBTQ+, which includes queer.

The literature review section endeavours to unpack LGBTQ+ marketing and the challenges that surround marketing authenticity. It then moves to the ERC model used to mine

the transcripts. Moreover, the literature review exposes the inconsistencies and gaps that need further examination.

LGBTQ+ marketing

In its basic form, LGBTQ+ marketing refers to marketing initiatives (e.g. advertising) targeting LGBTQ+ communities, aiming to represent and engage these diverse groups effectively. This approach not only seeks to appeal to LGBTQ+ consumers, but also challenges traditional marketing norms (Pirani & Daskalopoulou 2022). Common themes in LGBTQ+ marketing include using LGBTQ+ imagery in advertising, consumer behaviour and brand positioning as a distinct consumer market. These themes highlight the need for marketing strategies that recognise the unique needs and identities of LGBTQ+ consumers (Lewis, Mehmet & Reynolds 2024). However, there are controversies, in that LGBTQ+ marketing is often skewed towards certain demographics within this segment by predominantly featuring gay men and focusing on audiences from the Global North.

There is a call for more nuanced and diverse representations that include a broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences (Coffin, Eichert & Nolke 2019; Lewis et al. 2024). Coffin et al. (2019) lamented the lack of research beyond urban Anglo-American consumer cultures and stated there is a need for studies that consider the intersection of sexual identities with race, class and other differences. The visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ marketing vary significantly across different regions, and South Africa is no different. Coombes and Singh (2022) lament for more LGBTQ+ voices from the Global South. In more conservative areas, businesses may face challenges in visibly marketing to LGBTQ+ communities, although there is potential for these businesses to act as allies and support LGBTQ+ visibility beyond traditional 'gayborhoods' (Whittemore 2022). Contrastingly, Chatzopoulou et al. (2024) argued that inclusive marketing strategies involving a broader LGBTQ+ perspective can significantly enhance brand loyalty and engagement. Product and/or Brand-generated content that resonates with LGBTQ+ communities fosters stronger emotional connections and brand loyalty, particularly when authentic. The opposite is also true; when an organisation positions itself as an LGBTQ+ friendly brand, LGBTQ+ customers anticipate that the brand will engage in supportive business practices and advocate for LGBTQ+ causes, implying a transpersonal psychological contract between them and the brand. Thus, any brand transgression, such as an incident of discrimination against LGBTQ+ customers, is seen as a breach of this contract, leading to feelings of violation and prompting anti-brand behaviours (Ro & Kwun 2025).

LGBTQ+ marketing and authenticity

Authenticity is crucial in LGBTQ+ marketing. Brands must demonstrate credibility, integrity and representativeness to engage LGBTQ+ stakeholders effectively. There is often

scepticism towards brands that engage with historically marginalised groups, emphasising the need for genuine and meaningful communication. This authenticity is imperative for effective communication and engagement with LGBTQ+ stakeholders (Ciszek & Lim 2021). The use of queer signifiers in media can influence market culture and ideologies around gender and sexuality. Brands can leverage these signifiers to project authenticity, although this may sometimes lead to the commodification of queer identities (Södergren & Vallström 2021). Nevertheless, as Kang and Ro (2024) argued, brand authenticity for LGBTQ+ consumers is a key factor in building brand loyalty. This relationship is mediated by factual authenticity, which encompasses intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. Authenticity involves demonstrating genuine support and understanding of this segment and LGBTQ+ issues. This can mitigate scepticism, foster trust (Ciszek & Lim 2021) and increase engagement, such as purchasing (Lim et al. 2024). Brands increasingly demonstrate inclusion for LGBTQ+ people through participation in Pride parades and using rainbow colours in products or advertisements with such initiatives, 'if not too subtle', seen as 'a brave endorsement of the LGBTQ+ community'. While LGBTQ+ consumers value brands that develop authentic relationships with them, they also express cynicism about superficial or inconsistent engagement (Lewis et al. 2025).

The entity-referent correspondence framework

The ERC framework developed by Moulard et al. (2021) is a theoretical lens through which marketers can examine and understand brand authenticity. At its core, this framework investigates the dynamic relationship between brands and their consumers, specifically focusing on how consumers – in this case, LGBTQ+ community members – evaluate and determine a brand's authenticity. This evaluation process centres on assessing the degree of alignment or correspondence between the brand itself (functioning as the entity) and whatever the brand purports or is expected to be faithful to (serving as the referent). Within this conceptual structure, three fundamental categories of authenticity collectively form the framework: TTI, TTF and TTS.

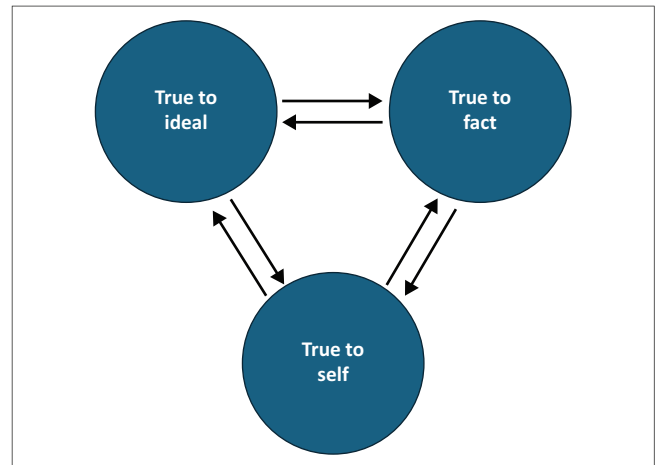
True-to-ideal authenticity refers to how effectively a brand aligns with idealised standards or aspirational benchmarks. According to Deng, Wang and Li (2024), this form of authenticity reflects consumers' perceptions about whether specific brand attributes conform to universally acknowledged standards or societal expectations. When a brand achieves TTI authenticity, it consistently maintains excellence across its claims, product quality and design aesthetics. As Bartsch, Zeugner-Roth and Katsikeas (2022) asserted, this consistency enables consumers to reliably categorise the brand and feel confident that their expectations will be met. True-to-ideal authenticity affects consumers' emotions and behaviours, such as revisiting intentions in dining experiences (Kim & Song 2024). Merging this domain with LGBTQ+ marketing, this authenticity assessment will

analyse how well a brand aligns with its conception of what genuine LGBTQ+ inclusion and representation should look like.

True-to-fact authenticity centres on a brand's adherence to factual reality and historical accuracy. This form of authenticity represents an objective dimension of brand reality, specifically addressing whether consumers perceive that a brand's services, benefits and product quality accurately reflect the claims made in its promotional materials and marketing communications. As explained by Deng et al. (2024), TTF authenticity is fundamentally grounded in verifiable, objective information, rather than subjective interpretations or aspirational ideals. Unlike other forms of authenticity that might involve more subjective judgements, TTF authenticity can be evaluated against concrete evidence and measurable criteria, and it is an objective truth. When consumers assess a brand through this lens, they are essentially asking whether the brand delivers on its explicit promises and whether its claims about product features, origins or manufacturing processes align with demonstrable reality. A positive TTF authenticity results in consumers perceiving brands as reliable and trustworthy, which enhances loyalty (Deng et al. 2024). Merging this domain with LGBTQ+ marketing, this authenticity assessment will evaluate the process that extends beyond marketing communication to examine the concrete realities of the brand.

True-to-self authenticity focuses on how consistently a brand adheres to its core identity, established values and foundational principles. According to Deng et al. (2024), this form of authenticity manifests through a brand's genuine commitment to service excellence, its ongoing dedication to improving product and service quality, and its unwavering loyalty to appropriate values and brand promises. Crucially, these commitments stem from internal motivations and genuine organisational beliefs, rather than being driven primarily by external considerations, such as commercial profits or market pressures. A positive TTS authenticity refers to the experience of feeling genuine and true to oneself, enhancing positive self-perceptions (Bailey & Iyengar 2023). Merging this domain with LGBTQ+ marketing, this authenticity assessment will investigate if a brand remains faithful to its professed LGBTQ+ values throughout its operations.

This multidimensional authenticity theory proposes that the three forms of authenticity – TTI, TTF and TTS – do not exist in isolation, but function within a dynamic, interconnected relationship. As illustrated in Figure 1, these three dimensions interact with and influence one another, creating a comprehensive framework for understanding how brand authenticity operates as a complex, integrated phenomenon, rather than separate, independent components. This interactive relationship suggests that a brand's authenticity is not determined by excellence in just one dimension, but through the interplay and balance of all three authentic expressions. The visual representation in



Source: Adapted from Moulard, J.G., Raggio, R.D. & Folse, J.A.G., 2021, 'Disentangling the meanings of brand authenticity: The entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 49(1), 96–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-020-00735-1>

FIGURE 1: Model of authenticity.

Figure 1 helps conceptualise how these dimensions overlap and potentially reinforce or occasionally conflict with one another in the overall authenticity assessment made by consumers.

The framework helps explain how consumers form perceptions of each type of authenticity, which can influence their expectations of quality and trust in the brand (Moulard et al. 2021). Concluding the literature examination, this study aims to advance the understanding of LGBTQ+ marketing within South Africa's unique cultural landscape. The evidence suggests that effective LGBTQ+ marketing requires more than representation – it demands authenticity. When marketers navigate the inherent challenges and embrace the opportunities in this domain, they not only forge meaningful connections with LGBTQ+ consumers, but also contribute to broader societal progress towards inclusion and acceptance. The ERC framework provides an ideal theoretical lens to explore these marketing dynamics. This framework allows us to analyse how brands establish authentic connections with LGBTQ+ consumers by examining the alignment between brand identity (the entity) and consumer self-concept (the referent). By applying this framework specifically to South African contexts, we can uncover the authenticity of LGBTQ+ marketing in South Africa.

Research methodology

Design and approach

This study's explorative aim lends itself to a phenomenological research design. This design is rooted in philosophy and psychology, and focuses on the lived experiences of humans (Korstjens & Moser 2017). The chosen paradigm to describe the phenomenological design was interpretivism, which is the process whereby the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences (Alase 2017). This design and paradigm form the IPA approach. Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves a deep interpretative process, where

researchers engage with participants' narratives to uncover hidden meanings and insights (Abdellatif & Haynes 2024). Interpretive phenomenology (or hermeneutic phenomenology) emphasises the interpretation of experiences, considering the context (LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity in this study) and influences, such as culture (LGBTQ+ population in this study) and personal history (Lopez & Willis 2004). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative methodology that employs a deep dive via in-depth interviews into a research phenomenon. A qualitative methodology is used when researchers explore complex realities through non-numerical data (Nassaji 2020). The IPA methodology of this study was based on the framework provided by Alase (2017).

Participants and sampling strategy

In phenomenological research, participant groups typically range from 2 to 25 individuals. These participants should be selected to demonstrate homogeneity, ensuring they share key characteristics relevant to the study. The purpose of conducting an IPA with a homogeneous sample is to gain deep insights into the collective perceptions within participants' lived experiences (Alase 2017). According to Creswell (2013:157), 'It is essential that all participants have similar lived experience of the phenomenon being studied'. Alase (2017) recommended purposive sampling to recruit qualified participants capable of providing rich, detailed accounts of the phenomena under study. When target participant numbers cannot be reached through purposive sampling alone, a snowball strategy may be implemented to attract additional participants – precisely the approach adopted in this study.

Participants were selected based on three specific criteria: active membership in the LGBTQ+ community, recent attendance at a Pride festival within the past few years and age between 18 and 65 years. Given the sensitive nature of recruiting LGBTQ+ members, the research began with purposive sampling, approaching individuals within the researcher's personal network of trusted connections. These initial participants were then asked to refer potential additional participants, effectively implementing the snowball sampling technique. This combined sampling approach yielded 15 participants, whose interviews were conducted online, with Microsoft Teams, or by telephone.

Data collection

An IPA study's primary data collection method involves in-depth interviews where participants articulate their understanding of the studied phenomenon. Alase (2017) suggested that IPA research should supplement traditional data collection methods, such as interviews, with academic literature to gather comprehensive information about the phenomenon under investigation. Collecting rich, detailed information for an IPA study can be challenging, as it may require participants to share personal and private aspects of their lives. Researchers may need to ask participants to discuss intimate details of their experiences over

extended periods. Furthermore, Alase (2017) noted that it would be impractical to begin research without some conception of what one is investigating and unwise not to define that inquiry explicitly. This study was initiated by thoroughly examining literature and probing academic articles on 'LGBTQ+ marketing' and 'LGBTQ+ marketing and authenticity'. After careful consideration, the ERC framework was chosen as the structure for this study. Although the interview protocol facilitated comprehensive exploration, it remained adaptable, even as the ERC warranted its content validity. In this context, three areas of inquiry were used in designing the interview protocol and supplementary questions for IPA. All participants were anonymised and identified as P1, P2, and so forth.

Data analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis employs a systematic multi-step sequential process of interpretation and abstraction to identify patterns and present the core essence of qualitative data. This study's analytical approach incorporated established frameworks from Alase (2017) and Crawford (2019), ensuring methodological rigour throughout the interpretive process.

The first step encompassed comprehensive interview transcript review and initial interpretation, requiring multiple readings to thoroughly understand participants' verbal communications and develop deeper insights into how the mobile application influenced their lived experiences. Analysis commenced with researcher interpretation to gain understanding of participants' personal and social worlds, manifesting as belief systems, meaning constructs or narrative storytelling reflecting their identities. Researcher interpretation serves as the analytical cornerstone, with IPA fundamentally seeking to comprehend the depth and complexity of these meanings (Crawford 2019). No specific rules dictate commentary requirements, as some interview sections prove richer and warrant more extensive analysis (Crawford 2019).

The second step involved 'meaning units' coding, organising participants' responses into meaningful chunks or sentences. This process transforms responses into manageable formats while identifying recurring keywords or phrases that participants emphasise. These linguistic patterns reveal significant insights about message authenticity, potentially representing the core essence of lived experiences and relationship to the phenomenon under study. Meaning units elevate data and interpretation to higher abstraction levels, incorporating specialised terminology while maintaining transparent connections between participants' original statements and researcher interpretations (Crawford 2019).

The third step constituted the core essence phase, where researchers condensed participants' responses into concise expressions using only one or two words. This final stage enabled systematic deconstruction while preserving voice integrity and authentic meaning.

Following abstraction completion, core essence validation enables formulation of final evaluations regarding the investigated phenomenon. Given substantial qualitative data volumes, responses are selectively chosen as representative findings examples. This study employed interpretive narrative presentation to ensure findings faithfully represent participants' meanings and understandings (Crawford 2019).

An interpretive narrative

According to Younas et al. (2023:9), interpretative narrative reporting enables readers to differentiate participants' viewpoints from researchers' explanations while offering integrated accounts. This approach succeeds when readers distinguish between direct statements and interpretations, requiring researchers to synthesise discrete information into complex wholes through integration, interpreting participants' meanings, behaviours and actions.

The rigour of the study

This study's rigour followed guidelines from Gonder and Clarkson (2024) and Weckesser and Denny (2022). Academic rigour in IPA is achieved through philosophical grounding, systematic data analysis and maintaining trustworthiness throughout the research process. Key elements ensuring credible findings included: philosophical foundations rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography; rigorous data analysis frameworks involving systematic transcript preparation, coding and theme development; researcher as instrument, interpreting data while authentically representing participants' experiences; trustworthiness through transparent interpretation and reporting with representative quotes; and methodological integrity ensuring ethical considerations and alignment with IPA's philosophical underpinnings throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Johannesburg CBE Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 15 September 2021. The ethics approval number is 2021SCiS042.

Findings

The performative paradox: LGBTQ+ authentic marketing through an interpretive lens

On the first assessment of TTI authenticity, several probing questions were asked to uncover participants' opinions about what genuine LGBTQ+ inclusion and representation should look like. The opinions shared by the participants revealed a complex relationship between LGBTQ+ communities and marketing practices that extends beyond surface-level observations. What emerged from the interpretation was a phenomenon that can be characterised as 'performative inclusion' – a pattern where brands engage with LGBTQ+ members primarily as a calendar-driven exercise, rather than a committed representation practice.

Participants' experiences suggested that companies approach LGBTQ+ marketing through a lens of convenience, rather than conviction. The temporal concentration of these efforts during Pride month indicates that brands view LGBTQ+ inclusivity as a calendar event, as opposed to an ongoing commitment to authentic representation. This seasonality of recognition carries implicit messaging about when and how LGBTQ+ identities are deemed commercially relevant: 'In the sense that if you see during Pride month, you'll see a lot of brands change their logos' (P2).

This cyclical inclusivity creates a paradoxical experience for community members who witness their identities amplified and silenced according to marketing calendars. The laughter accompanying P3's comment – namely 'So this year I haven't seen anything yet, which it should start now, right? [Laughs] Cause it's October [Pride month]' – revealed a knowing resignation that speaks to repeated disappointment. LGBTQ+ community members have learnt to expect this pattern and have developed defensive humour around it.

Particularly significant was the community's response to this marginalisation. Instead of merely lamenting exclusion, LGBTQ+ individuals have cultivated alternative channels of representation. The migration to social media platforms represents more than just a shift in medium, it embodies a reclamation of narrative control. By creating content on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, community members are not simply filling a void left by corporations, but are actively constructing spaces where authentic representation can flourish without corporate gatekeeping:

'Especially on social media. For instance, Tik Tok and Instagram, I see a lot of people supporting and, you know, a lot of people advertising their feelings and support towards the community.' (P15)

The participants' apparent withdrawal from mainstream marketing conversations suggests an emotional evolution beyond frustration towards self-determination. This disengagement should not be interpreted as apathy, but rather as a strategic reallocation of emotional and creative resources. The communities have assessed the limitations of traditional marketing structures and made a collective decision to invest elsewhere.

The criticism of rainbow-washing – 'Literally anything with the rainbow flag on it' (P8) – speaks to a sophisticated understanding of the difference between symbolism and substance. Participants recognised that authentic representation requires more than visual shorthand; it demands a deeper engagement with the lived experiences of community members. The frustration with 'slap[ping] a rainbow on something' (P14) stems not from the symbol itself, but from what it represents: a superficial understanding of a multidimensional community.

The community's critique of stereotypical representations reveals an awareness of intersectional identity that exceeds

the marketing industry's current framework. When participants advocate for including 'plus-size, transgender, intersex, people of all races, all shapes, sizes and colours' (P14), they are articulating a vision of marketing that acknowledges the full spectrum of human diversity within LGBTQ+ communities. This desire for holistic representation challenges the reductive tendency to flatten complex identities into recognisable archetypes. It is not about 'the brands [that] are using white gay men, kissing or holding hands' (P4).

Perhaps most revealing was the persistent hope expressed by participants, despite repeated disappointments. This resilient optimism suggests that the community members' relationship with marketing is aspirational – they continue to envision possibilities for authentic representation, while navigating current inadequacies. The emotional investment in potential future recognition indicates that participants viewed marketing not merely as a commercial practice, but as a broader cultural signal about acceptance and belonging.

The expressed desire for authentic representation reflected a deeper yearning for validation that transcends commercial contexts. When participants spoke of feeling 'happy, proud and ecstatic' (P9) in response to genuine representation, they described not just satisfaction with marketing tactics, but an affirmation of their full humanity. This emotional response underscored the profound impact that authentic marketing can have on marginalised communities – it is not simply about seeing themselves in advertisements, but about being acknowledged as valued members of society. Through this interpretive lens, communities are engaged in complex negotiations of visibility, authenticity and self-determination – actively shaping their representation, while holding space for corporate marketing to evolve towards more meaningful forms of inclusion.

According to this interpretation of the findings, the TTI authenticity assessment within the context of LGBTQ+ marketing fails spectacularly. Moulard et al. (2021:99) provided a specific example to illustrate their concept: 'A country music song is authentic if its attributes match the commonly accepted template of country music'. They explained that for TTI authenticity to be evaluated, there must be consensus regarding the characteristics of the ideal. This study revealed a disconnect between LGBTQ+ marketing and widely accepted representations of LGBTQ+ communities.

However, there appears to be a potential resolution to this disconnect. As ideals are socially constructed through dynamic processes, they exist in continuous flux. Within this state of flux, various stakeholders compete to establish their interpretations of the ideal. As Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) observed, because the ideal itself can be contested, TTI authenticity is similarly open to dispute.

While absolute TTI authenticity may be unattainable because of the socially constructed nature of ideals, establishing and documenting a consensus regarding the ideal remains necessary. For instance, Le Comité Interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne, an organisation dedicated to promoting authentic champagne, established stringent criteria that must be met for a wine to carry the champagne label, including the requirement that grapes be cultivated in designated areas within the Champagne region. When no agreed-upon ideal exists, TTI marketing authenticity is often deemed inauthentic (Moulard et al. 2021).

Beyond features and function: LGBTQ+ interpretations of product quality

The second TTF assessment also employed several questions to evaluate the process that extends beyond marketing communication to examine the concrete realities of the brand. When examining participants' responses around product quality assessment, what emerged was not simply a series of evaluations, but rather a complex framework of value determination that intersects with identity, community recognition and categorical understanding. The challenge in obtaining 'objective opinions' reveals an important dynamic – that authenticity of assessment is inherently tied to lived experiences with these products, suggesting that quality is understood through connections, relationships and concrete interactions.

The vibrancy and passion evident in these discussions indicate that product quality is more than utilitarian evaluation; it functions as a site of community discourse where values are negotiated and affirmed. The participants' animated engagement suggests that quality assessment represents an opportunity to articulate collective standards that align with community identity.

The distinction participants drew between luxury and budget brands revealed a sophisticated understanding of market positioning, but more significantly, it illuminated how these categories carry different symbolic weights within community contexts. When P12 noted that Mercedes-Benz 'is a fabulous brand' where 'the quality is true', the participant was not merely commenting on engineering standards, but articulating how certain luxury markers align with aesthetic and authenticity values within LGBTQ+ culture. The repeated mentions of Mercedes-Benz suggest the brand holds a particular cultural resonance that transcends its material properties – it embodies a symbolic quality standard against which other experiences are measured. Similarly, the frequent references to Starbucks indicate how everyday consumption choices become integrated into community quality frameworks. The pairing of Mercedes-Benz and Starbucks in participant discourse reflects an interesting negotiation between aspirational luxury and accessible quality, suggesting that LGBTQ+ quality assessments operate across price points, rather than within them.

The distinction between global and local brands reveals another layer of this quality framework. When P14 expressed personal enthusiasm for Converse and Dr. Martens, noting 'it was also good designs', the participant integrated aesthetic considerations into functional quality assessments. This suggests that for many participants, quality is inseparable from design sensibility – the visual language of a product communicates its value as much as its durability or performance. The mention of locally sourced, privately owned underwear and T-shirt companies points to a quality dimension tied to scale and authenticity of representation. These smaller companies using LGBTQ+ representation for testimonials indicates a recognition that authentic community representation may be considered a quality attribute – that how a brand engages with identity can be as important as the material properties of its products.

Absolut Vodka's emergence as a special case within these discussions illuminated how historical context shapes quality perceptions. The brand was contextualised specifically within nightlife and celebration – in the context of partying and having a 'good time' and explicitly recognised as having 'always been an ally to the queer community' (P5). This suggests that longevity of support for LGBTQ+ communities becomes integrated into quality assessments, demonstrating how ethical history becomes part of product evaluation.

The absence of brands specifically called out for poor quality was particularly revealing. Rather than indicating a lack of critical assessment, participants have developed a more nuanced framework where quality is understood as multidimensional – 'a series of decisions', rather than a simple attribute. This reflects a sophisticated consumer consciousness that resists dual good or bad categorisations in favour of understanding products within 'constructed categories' that incorporate community values, history, aesthetics and functionality.

What emerged from this interpretation was that for these participants, quality assessment is not merely about evaluating product attributes, but about situating those products within community-specific frameworks of value that integrate identity, history, representation and aesthetics into a holistic understanding of worth. According to this interpretation of the findings, the TTF authenticity assessment within the context of LGBTQ+ marketing succeeds brilliantly.

Moulard et al. (2021) emphasised that, unlike the dynamic ideal in TTI authenticity, facts in TTF authenticity remain constant. Facts align with realist perspectives, reflecting an underlying reality. Authentic marketing communications in this context accurately represent required activities or product attributes, making brands appear sincere, candid and credible. However, facts can be complex and multifaceted. True-to-fact authenticity may also be implied when a product's image or appearance suggests authenticity claims. This study identified

such implicit claims regarding Mercedes-Benz's quality and the designs of Converse and Dr. Martens products. When facts are explicit or implied, TTF marketing authenticity is deemed authentic (Moulard et al. 2021).

Market calculation or moral conviction: Interpreting brand support for LGBTQ+ communities in a conservative context

The third TTS authenticity assessment also used many questions to investigate if a brand remains faithful to its professed LGBTQ+ values throughout its operations. This finding revealed a complex interplay between brand motivations, LGBTQ+ communities' perceptions and cultural contexts. What emerged was not a simple binary of brand authenticity, but a nuanced landscape where multiple factors shape corporate engagement with LGBTQ+ authenticity. The data suggest that LGBTQ+ community members possess a sophisticated awareness of corporate motivations, recognising the potential gap between public expressions of support and genuine commitment. This awareness manifests as a form of cultural literacy where community members can distinguish between authentic allyship and performative inclusion.

South Africa's specific cultural context emerged as a critical mediating factor. P9's characterisation of South Africa as 'backward' with Christianity playing 'a very big part' pointed to how religious and traditional values create a distinctive environment that shapes both corporate decision-making and public reception of LGBTQ+ support. This highlights how global corporate inclusion strategies must navigate local cultural meanings and values.

The historical marginalisation of LGBTQ+ communities creates another layer of complexity. Brands must navigate the tension between expanding their appeal to LGBTQ+ consumers, while potentially alienating their established 'straight' clientele. P1's observation about brands potentially 'losing a part of their client base' suggests corporate support for LGBTQ+ issues involves calculated risk assessment, rather than purely value-driven decisions.

Corporate power and market position also emerged as significant factors. The perception that established brands with significant market dominance such as Mercedes-Benz and Vodacom can afford to support LGBTQ+ causes because customer switching costs are high reveals how economic power mediates corporate social positioning. As P2 noted, 'Mercedes-Benz doesn't really care; like they are going to get their customers anyway', suggesting that market position provides insulation from potential backlash.

The representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in luxury brand marketing through stereotypical imagery of 'muscle Marys' or drag queens suggests a commodification of LGBTQ+ identity that serves brand interests, rather than authentic inclusion. This raises questions about whether visibility constitutes meaningful representation or merely reproduces

limiting stereotypes that reinforce otherness. This multifaceted analysis suggests that corporate's genuine commitment to LGBTQ+ communities exists within a complex web of economic calculations, cultural contexts and varying degrees of authentic commitment, rather than simply reflecting either genuine allyship or cynical opportunism. This interpretation of the findings found the TTS authenticity assessment within the context of LGBTQ+ marketing ended in significant failure.

According to Moulard et al. (2021), TTS authenticity is deeply rooted in self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan 2000). Self-determination theory establishes a motivational spectrum ranging from intrinsic motivation (originating from within oneself, in this case internal company values) to extrinsic motivation (stemming from external forces, in this case sociocultural constraints). Behaviours driven by intrinsic motivation represent the most authentic form of action, as they are inherently satisfying and enjoyable, characterised by personal engagement and dedication. These intrinsically motivated activities typically involve passion and enthusiasm. In contrast, extrinsic motivation drives behaviours performed not for their inherent satisfaction, but for external outcomes such as rewards or the avoidance of punishment.

When applied to brand contexts, TTS authenticity reflects consumers' perceptions that marketers are genuinely passionate about their products or services (intrinsically motivated), as opposed to simply responding to market demands and commercial pressures (extrinsically motivated). This distinction is crucial for understanding how consumers evaluate brand authenticity based on perceived motivational origins (Moulard et al. 2021).

The study's findings definitively demonstrate an absence of authentic LGBTQ+ marketing within the study's framework. As Moulard et al. (2021) contended, this represents a clear instance of inauthenticity, where consumers' perceptions reveal a substantial disconnect between marketing efforts (the entity) and the actual LGBTQ+ communities (the referent). This misalignment highlights a significant population gap, encompassing disparities in demographic representation, development and understanding between different groups. Population gaps manifest through various dimensions, such as urban-rural divides, regional development imbalances, cultural and religious differences, and economic disparities (Liang et al. 2021; O'Brien et al. 2020). While LGBTQ+ visibility in marketing has increased notably, a profound gap persists in understanding and addressing the diverse needs within these communities. This gap is particularly evident in three critical areas: authentic representation, nuanced consumer behaviour analysis and cultural competency (Fish et al. 2022; Lewis et al. 2024).

Consequently, the study's exploration of LGBTQ+ marketing authenticity reveals not merely tactical marketing shortcomings, but a more fundamental disconnect between

TABLE 1: Connecting the findings to the entity-referent correspondence framework.

ERC dimensions	Theme	Result of assessment
TTI	The performative paradox: LGBTQ+ authentic marketing through an interpretive lens	FAILED: There is a disconnect between LGBTQ+ marketing and widely accepted representations of LGBTQ+ communities.
TTF	Beyond features and function: LGBTQ+ interpretations of product quality	PASSED: LGBTQ+ quality assessment transcends traditional product evaluation, instead embedding products within community-specific value frameworks that holistically integrate identity, history, representation, and aesthetics to determine worth.
TTS	Market calculation or moral conviction: Interpreting brand support for LGBTQ+ communities in a conservative context	FAILED: There is a complete absence of authentic LGBTQ+ marketing, demonstrating clear inauthenticity where consumer perceptions expose substantial disconnection between marketing efforts and actual LGBTQ+ communities, highlighting a significant population gap.

ERC, entity-referent correspondence; TTI, true-to-ideal; TTF, true-to-fact; TTS, true-to-self; LGBTQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning) individuals, with the plus symbol indicating additional identities within the broader community.

commercial intent and community reality. This disconnect underscores the need for marketing approaches grounded in genuine understanding, rather than opportunistic visibility.

A snapshot of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Managerial implications

Marketing professionals must establish collaborative partnerships with LGBTQ+ community members to develop authentic representation standards based on our TTI authenticity findings. This requires direct consultation where diverse LGBTQ+ voices articulate their specific representation preferences and needs. By shifting from brand-determined representation to co-created marketing principles, organisations can better reflect authentic LGBTQ+ experiences, while avoiding tokenism and stereotypes. This collaborative approach would establish clear guidelines addressing community diversity, intersectional identities and evolving representation needs, ultimately creating marketing that genuinely resonates with LGBTQ+ audiences and allies.

To leverage TTF authenticity, marketing managers must develop a consistent advertising presence that clearly communicates product attributes and quality specifications. By establishing 'front of mind' awareness through factual messaging, brands enable consumers to form quality perceptions even without direct product testing. This transparency-focused approach builds consumer trust and credibility by making quality attributes mentally associated with the brand before the actual experience occurs. Even if the quality of a product cannot be tested, it should be able to be implied.

To establish TTS authenticity, marketing managers should implement a comprehensive approach that integrates both TTI and TTF principles, while maintaining consistent visibility. This integrated strategy demonstrates enduring

commitment, rather than temporary interest, fostering genuine trust within LGBTQ+ communities. By persistently communicating factual product information while representing community-defined ideals, brands create a coherent, authentic presence that resonates as sincere, as opposed to opportunistic.

Theoretical implications

This research makes two significant theoretical contributions to marketing authenticity and marginalised consumer behaviour literature. Firstly, it extends authenticity theory by demonstrating that the three dimensions of marketing authenticity (TTI, TTF and TTS) can operate independently and contradictorily within the same context, as evidenced by LGBTQ+ marketing achieving TTF authenticity through genuine product quality while failing in TTI and TTS dimensions, challenging assumptions that authenticity operates as a unified construct. Secondly, it contributes to marginalised consumer behaviour theory by introducing 'performative inclusion' as a distinct corporate engagement form that marginalised communities recognise and navigate through sophisticated defensive mechanisms such as 'knowing resignation' and 'reclamation of narrative control' through alternative channels, expanding understanding of how marginalised consumers actively resist corporate messaging and create authentic spaces outside traditional frameworks rather than remaining passive recipients of corporate performativity.

Conclusion

From this study's findings, it is evident that LGBTQ+ communities are ill represented and that branding and marketing are inauthentic. The implications are that this segment is evolving beyond this frustration towards self-determination. This evolving strategy includes cultivated alternative channels of representation, mainly through social media evolution beyond frustration towards self-determination. Interestingly, LGBTQ+ communities evaluate product quality through a sophisticated value assessment that integrates personal identity considerations, community validation and contextual understanding of product categories. Authentic engagement with LGBTQ+ communities requires ongoing involvement through open dialogue and mutual understanding.

Limitations and future studies

The research was conducted within South Africa's specific sociocultural context, where participants identified strong traditional values and cultural norms as significant barriers to authentic LGBTQ+ marketing initiatives. This finding suggests that national cultural frameworks may substantially influence how brands approach LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, future research should examine similar questions in countries with more progressive social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities. Such comparative studies

would help illuminate how varying cultural contexts shape brand authenticity in LGBTQ+ marketing and potentially identify best practices that transcend cultural boundaries while respecting local sensitivities.

This research was conducted during Pride month, a period characterised by heightened visibility and awareness of LGBTQ+ issues across media and marketing channels. This timing may have influenced participants' perceptions and sensitivities regarding LGBTQ+ representation in advertising and brand communications. The temporal context potentially created a heightened awareness among both participants and brands, possibly affecting how marketing authenticity was perceived and evaluated. To establish whether these findings represent consistent consumer perspectives or are contextually influenced by Pride month, future research should investigate similar questions during other times of the year when LGBTQ+ issues may not receive such concentrated public and corporate attention. This methodological adjustment would help determine whether the observed patterns reflect enduring consumer attitudes or are partially shaped by the distinctive cultural moment of Pride month celebrations and associated marketing activities.

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Data availability

No lists of figures of raw data were included. Data transcripts are kept in the author's office for five years after which it will be destroyed. The data excel spreadsheet is available from the corresponding author, M.W., upon reasonable request.

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