Something seems fishy: mainstream consumer response to drag queen imagery

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Abstract

This study investigates how drag queen imagery in advertising and mainstream consumers' tolerance towards homosexuality (i.e., drag queens) affect their attitudes towards the advertisement and brand in the context of beauty brand advertising. Based on the social identity theory, this study posits that implicit (vs. explicit) drag queen-themed imagery and consumers holding high tolerance as an in-group of LGBTQ+ cultures (vs. out-group of lower tolerance individuals) would have greater impact on ad attitude and brand attitude independently and together. A web-based experiment reveals that while different imagery types (implicit vs. explicit) in ads do not differentiate attitudes toward ad and brand, consumers' individual tolerance of the drag queen culture positively affects such responses. Additionally, the ad imagery and consumer tolerance toward drag queens have an interaction effect on brand attitude via ad attitude in the explicit drag queen-themed imagery condition but not in implicit imagery. The results add insight to a growing body of literature on the LGBTQ+ and social identity theory research and benefit marketers with a better understanding of how to manage drag queen-themed advertisements within mainstream media.

Keywords: Drag queen, Tolerance, Advertising, Attitudes, Beauty brand, LGBTQ+

Introduction

In an era of multicultural diversity, marketers are witnessing the widespread presence of cultural and sexual minorities, namely lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and plus (LGBTQ+[1]) in mainstream media. This lucrative market is growing as the ratio of American adults identifying as LGBTQ+ increased to 4.5% in 2017 from 4.1% in 2016 (Newport 2018), while the purchasing power of this group reached $917 billion in 2015, up from 3.7% in 2014 (Green 2016). Accordingly, the LGBTQ+ culture is deemed to be an opportunity for fashion brand marketers (Hester and Gibson 2007).

Simultaneously, Americans' perceptions of LGBTQ+ lifestyles are experiencing more positive shifts. According to a recent Gallup Poll, as of 2018, 56% of US adults are satisfied with the acceptance of queer individuals in society, rising 14 percentage points from 38% in 2008. Even for the 38% of those surveyed who indicated their dissatisfaction, there are more people who want to see greater acceptance of gays and lesbians

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[1] LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and plus, which represents other sexual identities that can include pansexual, asexual and omnisexual.

(23%) than those hoping for less acceptance (8%) (McCarthy 2018). As such, mainstream beliefs and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ are moving in meaningful ways.

These changes in both queer and mainstream consumer markets mean that the fashion and beauty industries will face many challenges. While some may view this as exciting, others feel concerned about facing resistance within the mainstream media and broader consumer segments. This is perceived paradigm is now being approached: *how to attract the target segment without simultaneously alienating the members of society with a lower tolerance towards homosexuality (e.g., individuals who oppose LGTBQ+ rights).* Understanding the ways that marketers may be able to embrace the LGTBQ+ community and its supporters (e.g., mainstream consumers known as allies) via the mainstream media will be vital to acquiring additional market shares.

Nölke (2018) noted that the majority of recent LGBTQ+ advertisements is situated within the categories of fashion and apparel in both LGBTQ+ and mainstream media. Both media are deemed important for target markets; 40% of LGBTQ+ indicate that advertising in the LGBTQ+ media is more effective while 47% of them consider the mainstream media to be more impactful or equally important (CMI Community Marketing and Insight 2019).Despite the rapidly increasing interest in this particular culture and its visibility in fashion advertisements, research into this phenomenon is still scant, especially in the fashion marketing field (Bhat et al. 1996). For example, a recent survey reported that this community is digitally savvy and highly engaged with digital ads and social media (CMI Community Marketing and Insight 2019), but to our knowledge, there is no research that examines how LGBTQ+ and/or mainstream consumers respond to LGBTQ+ advertisements in different media environments. Likewise, brand marketers are still facing challenges in the communication of LGBTQ-related issues (Bellis 2018).

Therefore, this study intends to fill a void in the fashion marketing and advertising literature by examining how mainstream consumers receive drag queen-themed imagery in beauty brand advertising. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of drag queen-themed imagery in beauty brand advertising as a function of the following: (1) different ways that an advertisement portrays drag queen imagery (implicit vs. explicit imagery) and (2) consumers' individual characteristics relating to the drag queen phenomenon (tolerance toward drag queens).

Consequently, this study makes additional theoretical contributions to the body of research in fashion marketing and advertising by demonstrating how different ways of drag queen-oriented advertising (implicit and explicit imagery) and consumer individual characteristics (tolerance towards drag queens) work together to form their attitudes toward the ad and brand. By examining drag queens, a subculture of LGBTQ+, in beauty brand advertising, this study offers up-to-date knowledge enriching the fashion advertising literature. In addition, this study can benefit fashion marketers by helping them understand how to incorporate LGBTQ+ culture into their advertising in mainstream media in order to attract mainstream consumers.

Literature review and hypotheses development
Homosexuality in advertising
In response to the increasing societal interest in the LGBTQ+ community, the topic of LGBTQ+ is gaining popularity in various academic disciplines. Traditionally,

homosexuality has been a longstanding subject of importance in art, feminist studies, and fashion (Fleisher 1996; Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Schacht 1998). More recently, a growing number of studies in marketing and advertising fields have addressed homosexuality with a few distinctive patterns.

First, methodologically, much has relied on qualitative approaches to research the occurrence of homosexuality in marketing. They include mainly ethnographic approaches (Balzer 2005; Hopkins 2004) and case studies of specific cultural settings such as the movies, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Gudelunas 2017), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!* (Balzer 2005), *Paris Is Burning* (Balzer 2005), and RuPaul Charles's *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Brennan and Gudelunas 2017; Daems 2014). Such conceptual and exploratory knowledge invites empirical investigations into LGBTQ+ in marketing with a broad group of customers. Somewhat surprisingly, there is little empirical work on LGBTQ+ culture in the fashion marketing and advertising literature despite its increasing prevalence among mainstream media.

Second, extant empirical studies, mostly in the advertising literature, examined the effectiveness of portraying homosexuality in media where mixed findings were observed. For example, Åkestam et al. (2017) showed that portrayals of homosexuality in advertising elicit social connectedness and empathy, which enhance positive advertising effects. Contrarily, (El Hazzouri et al. 2019) demonstrated that ads presenting same-sex couples (vs. ads featuring mixed-sex couples) can result in negative responses to the ad and to the brand by evoking feelings of disgust. Tuten (2005) reported that queer consumers show positive responses to queer-friendly cues while heterosexual consumers show neutral responses. Relatedly, further studies identified different advertising cues leading to different reactions. For example, mixed sexual advertisements elicit favorable responses to a greater extent than only queer-themed advertisements do (Gong 2019). Additionally, regarding heterosexual consumers, implicit queer-themed advertising is received more favorably than explicit queer-themed advertising (e.g., Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Um 2016).

Third, in line with the mixed effects of queer-themed advertising, studies investigated boundary conditions that may determine its positive or negative performance. Various factors examined ranged from individual characteristics, such as gender (e.g., Hester and Gibson 2007), attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g., Bhat et al. 1998), tolerance toward homosexuality (e.g., Um 2016), and social dominance orientation (e.g., El Hazzouri et al. 2019) to contextual factors, such as moral-identity priming (El Hazzouri et al. 2019).

Fourth, much research has focused on queer consumers, referred to as the dream market, exploring how brands can attract this high-potential market with queer-targeted and mainstream media (Descubes et al. 2018). However, much remains to be learned about how mainstream (heterosexual) consumers view such media marketing and how they respond to the brand. The investigation into mainstream consumers' receptions of homosexuality ads is particularly important in the fashion and beauty industry (Nölke 2018), mainly because the goal of such advertising would go beyond targeting queer consumers. In fact, mainstream fashion and beauty brands are recognizing LGBTQ+ influencers as new marketing mavens attracting a wide variety of customers. That is, their expertise in beauty and fashion has drawn a vast number of followers from not only LGBTQ+ but also from mainstream consumer communities. Indeed, mass market

brands such as MAC Cosmetics enjoy employing queer men and drag queens as brand ambassadors and/or collaborators (Brennan and Gudelunas 2017). Additionally, such a strategy would benefit brands by adding value of diversity and inclusivity, which would further enrich brand authenticity and brand equity.

This study thus delves into the phenomenon of queer-themed advertising for fashion brands from the perspective of mainstream consumers. It is also noteworthy that, among the LGBTQ+ communities, we focus on drag queens presented in advertising because they are emerging as key influencers for mainstream media and thus fashion and beauty marketing. For example, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has become a cultural icon and an enormous stepping stone into mainstream culture for this traditionally marginalized subculture (Brennan and Gudelunas 2017; Daems 2014). As the first drag queen superstar, RuPaul has been participating in ad campaigns with fashion brands like MAC Cosmetics' Viva Glam campaign and L.A. Eyeworks. However, little research attention has been paid to this specific subculture; this investigation also addresses the recent call to consider additional gender identity categories beyond homosexuality, such as drag queens and transgender in marketing research (Eisend 2019; Kates 1999). Therefore, for this study, we use the term *drag queens* to refer to cisgender males who dress as women for the purpose of performing and entertaining audiences that are aware they are men (Hopkins 2004).

Social identity theory

To understand how mainstream consumers respond to drag queen-themed advertising, this study focuses on two factors: (1) the way advertising portrays drag queen imagery (implicit vs. explicit) and (2) consumers' individual characteristics relating to the drag queen phenomenon (tolerance toward drag queens). Social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Tajfel 1978) guides us to propose the effects that each factor individually and combined may have on mainstream consumers' responses. According to social identity theory (SIT), individuals define themselves partly in terms of a relevant membership in a social group. In this sense, individuals position themselves within various social groups that reflect their personal idiosyncratic characteristics and further define in-group characteristics (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Once formed, a social identity, referring to belonging as an in-group member as opposed to an out-group member, promotes positive self-relevant (self-esteem, self-enhancement) and group-relevant (commitment, loyalty) outcomes (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Tajfel 1978). Within consumer culture literature, it is well established that consumers accept products and practices that are perceived as congruent with their lifestyle and belief systems (Papaoikonomou et al. 2016). Moreover, consumers demonstrate their membership of specific groups (such as LGBTQ+ allies) through their lifestyle advocacy (Rhodes and Stewart 2016) and consumption choices (purchasing products that are endorsed by LGBTQ+ celebrities) (Papaoikonomou et al. 2016). Specific to the LGBTQ+ community, allies have been identified as vital advocates and supporters demonstrating their position within the in-group (Rhodes and Stewart 2016).

Within the context of this study, consumers who support LGBTQ+ communities and members of the LGBTQ+ subculture can be categorized as the in-group while those disapproving or ignoring LGBTQ+ are considered the out-group. In a similar vein, when presenting drag queens in a way that cares for mainstream consumers'

values/perceptions of LGBTQ+ in an ad, the ad would elicit the perception of in-group ad imagery for mainstream consumers with varying degrees of tolerance toward LGBTQ+ in comparison to one that projects a straightforward image of drag queens.

Implicit and explicit imagery in ads

How to effectively portray homosexuality in advertising has been a key topic with limited typologies. Some researchers identified the use of only queer versus mixed genders in advertising (e.g., Gong 2019), while others compared implicit versus explicit queer imagery in advertisements (Descubes et al. 2018; Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Um 2016). This study is in line with the latter, focusing on implicit and explicit drag queen-themed advertising claims. Implicit advertising does not clearly state its message and relies on a subtle means to deliver the message Andrews and Shimp 2018). Thus, implicit advertising allows consumers to draw their own conclusions. On the other hand, explicit advertising makes a direct statement and therefore viewers do not need to interpret the message (Andrews and Shimp 2018).

The distinctive roles between implicit and explicit imagery in advertisements have been documented in advertising and marketing literature (e.g., Descubes et al. 2018; Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Um 2016). Descubes et al. (2018), who examined French lesbians' evaluation of queer advertising, showed that lesbians had greater preference for queer-explicit imagery in comparison to queer-implicit imagery ads. Moreover, feminine-appearing lesbians (out-group lesbians) reported a greater ability to generate curiosity and likeability of queer-explicit imagery advertising than masculine or butch lesbians (in-group lesbians). Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) found that implicit imagery in mainstream marketing not only was received positively by the homosexual community but also by LGBTQ+ supporters without alienating low-tolerance consumers. Oakenfull et al. (2008) also found that the advertised message affected males and females differently and concluded that using homosexual imagery in advertisements that targeted women (who demonstrate higher tolerance towards homosexuals) exclusively was more positively received than by advertisements targeting low-tolerance or male dominated (mainstream) segments.

In the context of advertising featuring drag queens, a direct and strong claim of drag in an ad (i.e., an explicit drag-themed ad) in comparison to a roundabout depiction of drag (i.e., an implicit ad) may provoke more attention to the drag's figure and the consumers' perception that the ad portrays out-group values, leading to less favorable responses. On the other hand, an ad featuring a roundabout depiction of drag (i.e., an implicit ad) is less likely to bring attention to the drag presence and more likely to guide viewers' attention to the overall ad messages. Accordingly, viewers tend to process the ad in a similar way that they examine mainstream ads, leading to the perception that the ad features in-group traits and thus positive responses (e.g., Hester and Gibson 2007).

This study investigates the effectiveness of drag queen-themed advertising in terms of mainstream consumers' attitudes toward the advertising and the brand. Both factors have been widely adopted to capture advertising performance (Bhat et al. 1996; Um 2014). Attitude towards the ad captures a viewer's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the given ad; attitude toward the brand represents his/her favorable or unfavorable assessment of the focal brand that administers the ad (Bhat et al. 1996; Lutz 1985).

Hypothesis 1. An implicit drag-themed ad has a greater impact on positive attitudes toward the ad (H1a) and the brand (H1b) than an explicit ad

Tolerance toward drag queens

Previous research identified various individual variables having correlations with consumer evaluations of LGBTQ+-related marketing programs. They include demographic characteristics such as gender (Bhat et al. 1998; Oakenfull and Greenlee 2005; Oakenfull et al. 2008), and socio-psychological variables such as self-identification with the queer community (Descubes et al. 2018), social dominance orientation (El Hazzouri et al. 2019), tolerance toward homosexuality (Um 2016) and attitudes toward homosexuality (Åkestam et al. 2017). Perhaps due to the advantage of the effective market segmenting, gender, more precisely the sex-binary (male and female), has been the main focus to explain their responses to LGBTQ+-featured ads. However, such approach is problematic as it excludes those of other gender categories (e.g., intersex, transgender, genderfluid) (Eisend 2019; Kates 1999). Considering diversity of gender among mainstream consumers, we turn to one's psychological belief system that would work in LGBTQ+-themed advertising effects, which is tolerance toward drag queens.

Tolerance, as a psychological belief variable, refers to the degree to which an individual "permits as something not wholly approved of" (Black quoted in Stevenson 1988: 501). To enhance tolerance leads to positive changes and acceptance (Stevenson 1988; Vicdan and Firat 2015) that high tolerance is associated with being open, other-focused, and universalistic, while low tolerance relates to be self-focused, controlled, and intolerant to ambiguity (Um 2014). In this study, tolerance of drag queens is defined as the extent to which a consumer considers drag a moral and endurable lifestyle.

In line with the notion of social identity theory, the positive associations between tolerance levels and evaluations of queer-themed advertising are likely. Bhat et al. (1998) showed that the overall response to the advertisement was based upon tolerance levels, but that the attitude towards the brand was more muted or less negatively perceived by low-tolerant people. Um (2014) also verified Hester and Gibson (2007) that heterosexual consumers with high tolerance exhibit more favorable attitudes toward the ad and the focal brand, and greater purchase intention in comparison to those with low tolerance. Accordingly, an individual's level of tolerance toward LGBTQ+ captures the different levels of acceptance s/he has toward LGBTQ+ lifestyles.

When exposed to drag queen-themed advertising, consumers with high tolerance of drag queens (i.e., an in-group) would perceive the ad as being in line with basic human values of importance; thus, the ad would evoke in-group-based identities. As a result, more favorable in-group comparisons would occur. Those with low tolerance, contrarily, perceive a drag queen depicted in an ad as an out-group member, eliciting out-group-based identities. The out-group comparisons likely hinder them from favorably reacting to the ad and the brand.

Hypothesis 2. The higher consumers' tolerance of drag queens the more favorable their attitudes toward the ad (H2a) and the brand (H2b)

Furthermore, we presume that consumers' tolerance toward drag queen would work together with different portrayals of drag queen-themed advertising in determining their responses. Those with high tolerance of drag queens would feel less cognitive dissonance

Fig. 1 Research framework
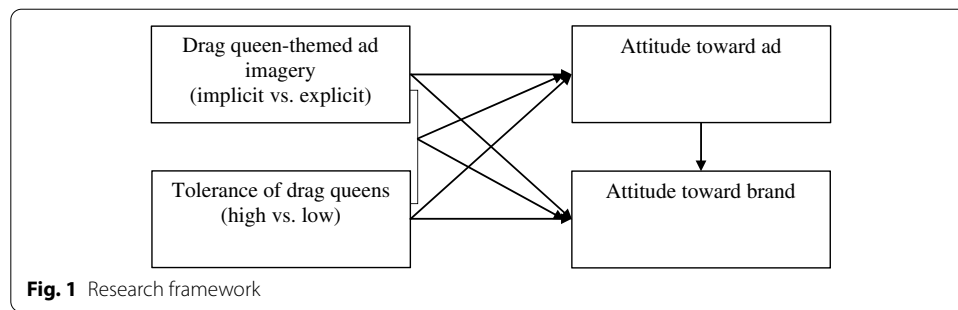
when processing either an explicit or implicit imagery of drag queens in an ad and thus, for them, the positive effect of explicit (vs. implicit) ad imagery on attitude would be enhanced. Conversely, those with low tolerance would experience cognitive dissonance when reviewing an explicit (vs. implicit) ad imagery. Then, they would likely discount the ad and brand in attempting to alleviate such dissonance. Therefore, consumer tolerance of drag may interact with a way that an ad renders a drag queen such that high tolerance can enhance the positive effect of explicit drag queen-themed imagery on attitude while low tolerance may lessen such effect.

Hypothesis 3.   There is an interaction effect between consumer tolerance of drag and the type of drag-themed ad such that, compared to implicit ad imagery, the effects of explicit ad imagery on attitudes toward the ad (H3a) and the brand (H3b) become stronger for those with a high tolerance

Lastly, regarding the role of attitude toward the ad, this study posits that ad attitude would mediate the interactive effects of ad type and tolerance on brand attitude. As an ultimate performance indicator, attitude toward the brand derives from an individual's cumulative evaluation of the brand's marketing programs, such as advertising. Additionally, the individual's cognitive evaluation of its advertising is formed based on how s/he receives the brand's implementation of the advertising. Therefore, it is posited that consumers' perceptions concerning drag-themed advertising mediate the influence that the type of ad imagery and their tolerance toward LGBTQ+ have on attitudes toward the focal brand.

Hypothesis 4.   Ad attitude mediates the interactive effects of drag queen-themed ad imagery and tolerance on brand attitude

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of drag queen-themed advertising imagery for mainstream beauty brand's communication marketing.

Method

Pretest: stimuli development

A pretest was conducted to develop a drag queen-themed ad for a beauty brand in two different ways: implicit and explicit imagery ads. Ad stimuli as a form of a press release for a beauty brand was used. Both were created with the same image of a drag queen (i.e., Sasha Velour), and the text within the press release was adjusted to demonstrate the implicit and explicit themes. For an implicit imagery condition, the press release did not explicitly mention drag queens in any way but depicted an image of one. For an explicit

imagery condition, the press release used the words *drag queen* and *LGBTQ+* within the text accompanied by an image of a drag queen (stimuli in Appendix A). A fictitious cosmetic brand targeted to market mainstream consumers was created. The use of the fictitious beauty brand was to avoid potential confounding effects the use of an existing brand could have on participants' responses. An institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the university prior to the pretest and the main study.

A web-based survey was distributed to undergraduate students majoring in retail and consumer sciences at a southern university in the US. The removal of invalid responses (e.g., those who indicated they were familiar with the drag queen model in the ad, Sasha Velour) resulted in 20 usable responses for data analysis ($M_{age} = 20.55$, $SD = 1.70$, 65% female). After reviewing the press release randomly assigned ($n_{implicit} = 11$, $n_{explicit} = 9$), each respondent indicated whether or not the given image showed a man impersonating a woman and how much the press release was marketed towards LGBTQ+ supporters (Hester and Gibson 2007) on a 7-point semantic differential scale (1 = none at all; 7 = a great deal). The manipulation was deemed successful as each image was correctly identified by over 90% of participants and the two conditions were significantly different in terms of the extent to which the press was marketed toward LGBTQ+ supporters ($F = 4.50$, $p < 0.05$). That is, the explicit condition ($M = 4.0$) was perceived to be marketed towards LGBTQ+ to a greater extent than the implicit condition ($M = 2.82$).

Main study

Design, participants and procedure: A web-based experiment was conducted with a single-factor between-respondent design, in which three levels of drag-themed imagery (implicit vs. control vs. explicit imagery) were developed in the form of advertising for a fictitious beauty brand's social media account. Implicit and explicit ad stimuli were manipulated using those in pretest. A control group was added for reference, which depicted a plain statement that introduced a new product line by the beauty brand with no indication of drag queens in the stimulus (stimuli in Appendix B).

A panel of US consumers was recruited via Amazon MTurk. Each participant was allocated randomly to one of the experimental ad conditions. Participants were first guided to review a brand's ad post in its social media account as consumers, and then they were to complete a questionnaire including measures concerning manipulation check, attitude towards the advertisement and brand, individual tolerance toward drag queens, and demographic information.

Measures: Participants' attitudes towards the advertisement and brand were captured using the three items from Hester and Gibson (2007) on a 7-point semantic differential scale: "very negative–very positive," "very unfavorable–very favorable," and "dislike very much–like very much." For tolerance toward drag queens, the Kite and Deaux's (1986) tolerance toward homosexuality scale was modified to reflect drag queens instead of homosexuals and asked on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) the following questions: "I see the drag queen movement as a positive thing," "I won't associate with drag queens if I can help it," "The increasing acceptance of drag queens in our society is aiding in the deterioration of morals," and "I do not mind having drag queens as friends." All three measures reported both Cronbach's alphas and construct reliabilities from confirmatory factor analysis greater than 0.90. Therefore, internal reliability of each construct was confirmed.

Results

Out of 199 participants, those who identified as transgender ($n=1$) and who preferred not to answer the gender category ($n=1$) were removed, leaving 197 valid responses for data analyses. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 76 years with a mean age of 35.87 years. The majority of the respondents were Caucasian (70.9%) followed by Asian American (8.5%) and Black American (8.0%). Both males and females were fairly represented (males $=54.8$%). More than half of them (58.8%) had a 4-year or higher college education and 22 respondents (11.1%) identified themselves as LGBTQ+.

Manipulation check

To evaluate the success of the drag queen-themed ad manipulation, we asked participants to assess the assigned advertising stimulus on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) in terms of the degree to which it highlighted the following: (1) drag queens; (2) face highlighters, which were products featured in the ad; and (3) the 2019 spring season. The items were modified from the test of explicitness measure by Hester and Gibson (2007). It was expected that three conditions would be different in explicitness of drag queens in ad but not in the latter two. First, the manipulation of drag queen-themed ad imagery was tested using a one-way ANOVA test. The result showed significant differences across three conditions [$F(2, 196)=74.63$, $p<0.001$]. Post-hoc pair-wise comparisons reported that all possible pairs were significantly different. Participants in the explicit ad condition felt the ad targeted drag queens most strongly ($n=71$, $M=5.93$), followed by the implicit condition ($n=64$, $M=3.95$) and then the neutral condition ($n=64$, $M=1.44$). Next, as anticipated, three groups did not differ significantly from one another in terms of how much the ad featured face highlighters [$F(2, 196)=1.79$, $p=0.17$] and the launch season [$F(2, 196)=2.49$, $p=0.09$]. Therefore, the manipulation was confirmed.

Hypothesis testing

To test hypotheses 1-3, a 3 (ad type: implicit vs. explicit vs. neutral) $\times$ 2 (tolerance toward drag queens: high vs. low) MANOVA was conducted using ad attitude and brand attitude as the dependent variables. Tolerance toward drag queens was coded as a categorical variable using a median-split method. First, there was no significant interaction effect for attitude toward advertising [$F(2, 193)=1.81$, $p=.17$, $\eta=0.02$]. The results further showed that ad attitude was predicted by tolerance toward drag queens [$F(1, 193)=13.11$, $p<0.001$, $\eta=0.06$] but not by the ad type [$F(2, 193)=1.29$, $p=0.28$, $\eta=0.01$]. Participants who hold high tolerance toward drag queens in comparison to those with low tolerance perceived the ad to be more positive ($M=3.81$ vs. 3.20, $p<0.001$). However, there was no difference in ad attitude across the three ad conditions ($M_{implicit}=3.54$ vs. $M_{explicit}=3.27$ vs. $M_{neutral}=3.62$, $p>0.05$) (Fig. 2a). Therefore, hypothesis 2a was supported but hypotheses 1a and 3a were rejected.

Next, the results reported a significant interaction effect between ad type and tolerance on attitude toward the brand [$F(2, 193)=4.73$, $p=0.01$, $\eta=0.05$]. Specifically, when the imagery of a drag queen-theme ad was explicit, participants who have high tolerance toward drag queens reported a more favorable attitude toward the focal brand than those with low tolerance ($M_{high}=3.84$ vs. $M_{low}=3.34$, $p=0.01$). Contrarily, when
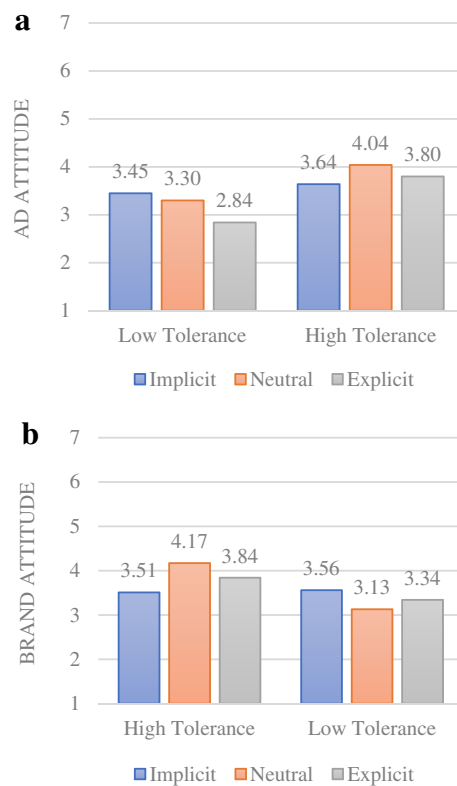
Fig. 2 a Interaction effects on ad attitude, **b** Interaction effects on brand attitude

the image was implicit, there was no significant difference in brand attitude between high and low tolerance groups ($M_{high} = 3.51$ vs. $M_{low} = 3.56$, $p > 0.05$). Moreover, tolerance had a significant main effect on brand attitude [$F(1, 193) = 11.91$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta = 0.06$, $M_{high} = 3.82$ vs. $M_{low} = 3.35$] but ad imagery type did not [$F(2, 193) = 0.21$, $p = 0.58$, $\eta = 0.002$, $M_{implicit} = 3.54$ vs. $M_{explicit} = 3.57$ vs. $M_{neutral} = 3.58$] (Fig. 2b). Thus, hypotheses 2b and 3b were supported but hypothesis 1b was rejected.

To test hypothesis 4 positing the mediation by ad attitude, the PROCESS SPSS macro for bias-corrected bootstrapping (Model 8 with 5000 bootstrap samples, Hayes, Hayes 2013; Hayes and Rockwood 2017; Preacher and Hayes 2004) was used with ad type as the independent variable, tolerance as the moderator, ad attitude as the mediator, and brand attitude as the dependent variable. A 95% confidence interval (CI) around the indirect effect of the mediator was examined where a significant mediation occurred if the CI was not zero (Preacher et al. 2007). Conditional indirect effects showed that there was a significant mediation by ad attitude for the high tolerance group only (Fig. 3). Specifically, for explicit drag queen-themed ad, participants with high tolerance toward drag queens (vs. low tolerance) significantly exhibited increased ad attitude, which in turn enhanced brand attitude (95% CIs 0.15 to 0.44, $B = 0.269$, $SE = 0.074$). In contrast, for an implicit drag queen-themed ad, no mediation by ad attitude occurred (95% CIs −0.06 to 0.29, $B = 0.135$, $SE = 0.086$). Thus, hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

Fig. 3 The mediating role of ad attitude
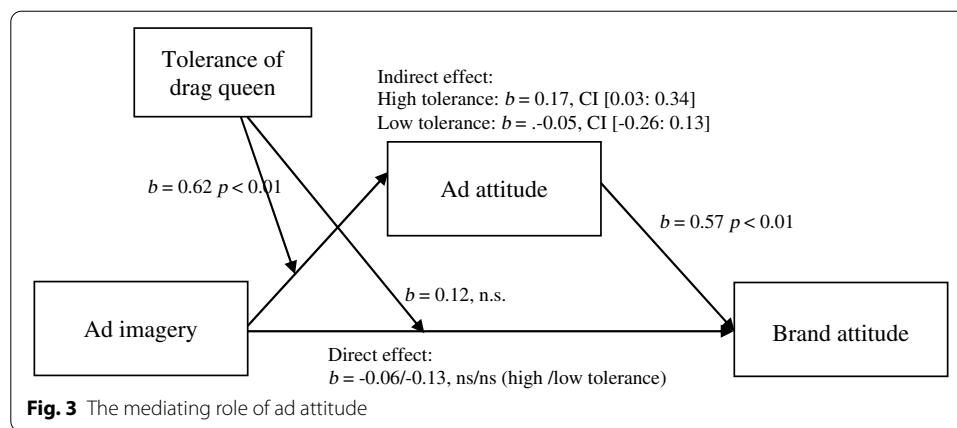
Discussion

The purpose of this empirical research was to explore how different imagery types in a drag queen-themed ad (implicit vs. explicit) and an individual's tolerance toward drag queens affect attitudes towards the ad and the brand from a mainstream consumer's perspective. The results suggest that while different ad types (i.e., implicit and explicit) do not have a differentiating effect on attitudes toward ad and brand attitudes, consumers' individual tolerance towards the drag queen culture affects such responses positively. Furthermore, in the explicit drag queen-themed imagery condition, the ad imagery and consumer tolerance toward drag queens interact with each other, and those who hold a high tolerance of such countercultures exhibit more favorable attitudes toward the brand than those holding a low tolerance. Lastly, this study found that ad attitude mediates the effects explicit ad imagery and tolerance have on brand attitude.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes contributions to fashion marketing and advertising literature by adding an empirical understanding of LGBTQ+-themed advertising and its effects from the perspective of the mainstream (heterosexual) consumers. In doing so, we focused on drag queens as a focal subculture of LGBTQ+ and therefore responded to Eisend's call for the extension of gender identity in advertising research.

This study sheds light on the LGBTQ+ cultures embedded in mainstream media by identifying levels of viewers' tolerance of the countercultures as the key factor. Among mainstream (heterosexual) viewers, those who are tolerant of such cultures respond more favorably to the ad and brand than those with low tolerance. This difference can be explained by the notion of in-group versus out-group in social identity theory (Turner and Tajfel 1986): people with high tolerance tend to perceive themselves as in-group members, thereby showing favorable reactions, while those with low tolerance act as out-group members. This finding broadens the application of SIT by identifying non-queer consumers into LGBTQ+-based in-group versus out-group members. Even heterosexual consumers who do not personally identify themselves as LGBTQ+ may develop the feeling of belonging or a sense of personal relatedness to the LGBTQ+ community. This study reaffirms the validity of social identity theory to explain how consumers perceive advertisements with LGBTQ+ imagery (Um 2014).

This study also adds new views to the effects of implicit and explicit ad imagery on mainstream viewers. Our results showed no differences in ad attitude between implicit and explicit ads. This finding is particularly interesting as it contradicts the general findings in previous research that argued for the superior performance of implicit homosexual imagery (e.g., Angelini and Bradley 2010; Um 2016). While this discrepancy invites further investigation, we cautiously speculate that our result may have to do with the overall positive shift in Americans' perceptions of LGBTQ+ lifestyles (McCarthy 2018). With substantial changes in Americans' views of LGBTQ+ toward acceptance, consumers are fairly open to mass media featuring LGBTQ+, not really differentiating the LGBTQ+ culture from others. This account merits in-depth empirical research.

Practical contributions

The double-edge sword of inclusive advertisements has acted as a barrier to many marketing practitioners from developing LGBTQ+ campaigns. Despite the overall perception of increased tolerance levels towards homosexuality by American consumers (Gong 2019), fashion and beauty advertisers may still be reluctant to embrace drag queen and LGBTQ+ inclusive imagery in advertisements outside LGBTQ+ targeted outlets (e.g., OUT magazine). This research can act as a catalyst to helping advertisers and marketers render more effective decisions in creating inclusive advertisements. The results of this study suggest that how to portray the drag queen image in an ad, specifically the explicitness of drag queens in the ad, is not as important as the level of viewers' tolerance towards drag queens. Therefore, marketers should have a clear understanding about the level of viewers' tolerance toward drag queens and LGBTQ+ to decide if they should launch LGBTQ+ -themed advertising and, if so, how.

More interestingly, if a brand pursues a target market with a high tolerance of LGBTQ+, making intended images and/or messages in LGBTQ+ ads and campaigns clear would effectively form viewers' positive attitudes toward the ad, and in turn, such attitudes toward the brand. If a brand mainly markets to consumers who are considered to be less tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community, more caution is recommended given that the use of either implicit or explicit ad design does not differentiate viewers' attitude toward the ad. Further investigations into different ways of effective inclusive ad/campaign designs and their effectiveness are needed.

Limitations and future research

Although the current study offers meaningful findings for existing literature, there are some limitations that yield routes for future studies. The first limitation that should be noted with our study is the use of one individual as the drag queen in our stimuli, which may limit viewers' understanding of drag queens and the ad. Although Sasha Velour, the model used in our stimuli, does not personally identify within the gender-binary, the respondents may simply categorize Sasha as a white queer male, perhaps because of the longstanding perpetuation of the hyper-sexualized imagery and beauty ideals of white queer men when it comes to homosexuality-oriented advertising. Likewise, research has continued to focus on a narrow and exclusive segment of white queer males in advertising perpetuating neoliberal homonormativity (Nölke

2018). Following Nölke's suggestion, future research should include more diverse drag imagery, which should include a variety of ethnicities, ages, and drag styles.

Another limitation with this study is the inability to expand past the gender-binary of participants. The importance of gender binary has played a role in processing LGBTQ+ advertisements (Bhat et al. 1998; Oakenfull et al. 2008). This limitation reflects the request of Eisend (2019) for the need to consider additional gender categories in LGBTQ+ advertising research. We eliminated responses of individuals who did not identify as gender binary due to the small sample size ($n = 2$). Future research could consider a stratified sampling technique to recruit a more diverse sample with better representation of more than two genders.

Finally, the stimuli used was designed as an ad for a social media platform not in other types of traditional media (e.g., print, television, billboard, etc.). We chose a social media platform due to its emerging popularity as an advertising/communication venue (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017) but call for caution in applying the results of this study to other media contexts.

In online contexts, marketers engage with a unique platform due to its community-building qualities facilitated by social media influencers (SMIs) (Sloan and Quan-Haase 2017). The examinations of SMIs could add to the depth of understanding. Also, external validity would increase if the advertisement had been printed in specific queer media outlets (e.g., OUT Magazine) and mainstream publications (e.g., Vogue). This would allow for future researchers to examine the effects of influencers and the location of the advertisement on viewers' attitudes towards the advertising.

Conclusion

Our research affords insight into the potential tradeoffs that a marketer faces in using inclusive imagery in advertisements as well as any potential risks involving the overall attitude towards the brand when targeting a mainstream consumer segment. Fashion and beauty marketing teams should consider LGBTQ+ inclusive imagery in advertisements without the risk of tarnishing the overall brand image to consumers, even the ones who might feel uncomfortable with the content of the advertisement. This study provides new insight to advertising literature that has argued implicit homosexual imagery is the best tactic to target the LGBTQ+ community and their supporters. Our findings are in line with previous SIT research but have added insight into the exciting new context of drag queens. Specifically, this is arguably the first study to examine the effects of drag queen imagery in beauty brands' advertisements.

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Appendix A

Experimental ad stimuli in pretest

See Fig. 4.

Fig. 4 Experimental ad timuli in retest

Appendix B

Experimental ad stimuli in main study

See Fig. 5.

Fig. 5 experimental ad stimuli in main study

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