

11th PhD Symposium on Contemporary Greece and Cyprus Hellenic Observatory

On the subject

"The Impact of Pinkwashing on LGBTIQ+ Consumer Wellbeing and the Role of Authentic Marketing in Ethical Branding"

SCHOOL	European University Cyprus, EUC
PROGRAM	PhD IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
AUTHORS	Panos Georgiou
SUPERVISOR	Dr Yioula Melanthiou, CUT
YEAR OF STUDY	Four (4)
KEYWORDS	Pinkwashing; LGBTIQ+; Consumer Wellbeing; Consumer Values; Authentic Marketing; Inclusive Marketing; Ethical Branding

Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Research Context and Literature Review	3
2.1	The Evolution of LGBTIQ+ Marketing.....	3
2.2	Understanding Pinkwashing	4
2.3	Consumer Wellbeing in LGBTIQ+ Contexts.....	4
2.4	Authentic Marketing as an Ethical Alternative	5
2.5	Knowledge Gap and Research Questions.....	5
3.	Conceptual Framework	6
4.	Research Design and Methodology	6
4.1	Research Approach	6
4.2	Systematic Literature Review	6
4.3	Primary Research Methods.....	7
4.3.1	Data Collection	7
4.3.2	Sampling Strategy	7
4.3.3	Data Analysis	7
4.4	Ethical Considerations	7
5.	Expected Contributions and Implications	8
6.	Conclusion.....	8
7.	References	9

1. Introduction

The concept of pinkwashing extends beyond merely superficial representation, encompassing the instrumentalisation of queer identities for commercial gain without addressing underlying issues of discrimination or support for LGBTIQ+ rights (Tressoldi et al., 2023). This research aims to critically examine the impact of pinkwashing on LGBTIQ+ consumer wellbeing and explore the potential of authentic marketing as an ethical alternative with the following main objectives: 1) assess the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of pinkwashing on LGBTIQ+ consumers; 2) analyse how pinkwashing affects consumer trust and brand perception; 3) evaluate authentic marketing as an ethical branding approach that enhances LGBTIQ+ consumer wellbeing; and 4) develop a conceptual framework linking these elements.

According to the Association of National Advertisers (2024), 82% of consumers believe brands should increase their LGBTIQ+ marketing efforts, highlighting the need for more supportive and genuine approaches. However, this must be balanced against the potential harm caused by inauthentic or exploitative marketing practices. Thus, the study is particularly timely given the growing consumer scepticism towards corporate activism (Hall et al., 2024) alongside the increasing demand for authentic brand alignment with social causes.

By developing and testing a conceptual framework that links pinkwashing, authentic marketing, and consumer wellbeing, this study will contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications within marketing ethics, providing valuable guidance for ethical branding practices in an increasingly diverse marketplace.

2. Research Context and Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of LGBTIQ+ Marketing

Marketing to LGBTIQ+ communities has undergone significant evolution, transforming from niche, coded messaging to mainstream visibility. Montecchi et al. (2023) identified distinct phases in this evolution: crisis, marketisation, and advocacy. Initially, brands approached LGBTIQ+ marketing cautiously, fearing backlash from heteronormative audiences. The marketisation phase saw increased targeting of the "pink dollar" as brands recognised the economic potential of LGBTIQ+ consumers. The current advocacy phase presents a complex landscape where brands position themselves as allies while facing heightened scrutiny regarding authenticity.

This evolution reflects broader societal changes in attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ communities and rights. However, Lewis et al. (2024) note that existing research on LGBTIQ+ marketing predominantly features heterosexual samples from the Global North, with LGBTIQ+ samples often limited to gay men, indicating significant gaps in understanding the diverse experiences within these communities.

Despite increased marketing interest in LGBTIQ+ consumers, representation in advertising remains disproportionately low. Research found that while LGBTIQ+ people represent approximately 9% of the UK population, only 2.5% of television advertisements during Pride Month contained any LGBTIQ+ visibility, with merely 0.65% featuring LGBTIQ+ themes as a central focus. (System1 and WFA, 2024). The study also demonstrated that advertisements with LGBTIQ+ visibility significantly improved long-term advertising effectiveness among LGBTIQ+ consumers without negatively impacting general audience reception.

2.2 Understanding Pinkwashing

Pinkwashing, originally coined by Breast Cancer Action (BCA) in 1985 to describe deceptive cause marketing in breast cancer campaigns, has evolved to encompass various forms of cause-washing practices (Blackmer, 2019). In the context of LGBTIQ+ marketing, pinkwashing refers to the appropriation of queer identities and themes for commercial benefit without genuine commitment to LGBTIQ+ communities and causes.

Several key issues with pinkwashing have been identified by Schulman (2021), including the instrumentalization of queer identities, erasure of marginalised voices, diversion from accountability, undermining of authentic advocacy, and potential psychological harm to LGBTIQ+ individuals. These concerns highlight the ethical dimensions of pinkwashing within marketing practices and its potential impact on consumer wellbeing.

In the Greek context, pinkwashing has emerged as a political issue, particularly surrounding the 2024 same-sex marriage legislation. Χρησιδης, (2024) argues that the Greek government has employed superficial approaches to LGBTIQ+ rights, implementing piecemeal legislation without substantive follow-through or societal education, using these limited advances as political leverage when faced with criticism. Similarly, during parliamentary debates, opposition leaders explicitly accused the government of engaging in pinkwashing to “whitewash its other actions” (Γρήγκοβιτς, 2024). These examples demonstrate how pinkwashing extends beyond commercial contexts into governmental policy, where symbolic gestures toward LGBTIQ+ rights may serve to deflect attention from other political controversies.

Growing consumer scepticism toward pinkwashing is evident, with participants perceiving pinkwashed advertisements as misleading once they are informed of inconsistencies between marketing messages and actual corporate practices. This suggests that pinkwashing can significantly damage consumer trust and brand perception, particularly among well-informed consumers (Hall et al., 2024).

2.3 Consumer Wellbeing in LGBTIQ+ Contexts

Wellbeing is defined by Powell et al. (2024) as a multifaceted concept encompassing physical, mental, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual components. Within LGBTIQ+ contexts, consumer wellbeing includes psychological aspects related to identity and self-concept, emotional dimensions of belonging and validation, and social wellbeing in terms of community connection and inclusion.

The importance of protective factors that promote LGBTIQ+ wellbeing, including interpersonal, community, and legal factors, has been highlighted by Ceatha et al. (2021). Their research emphasises the need for further investigation into how these factors interact to support LGBTIQ+ individuals across different contexts, including consumer experiences.

The limited examination of how inauthentic representation affects these dimensions of wellbeing represents a significant research gap, particularly regarding the intersectional understanding of diverse LGBTIQ+ experiences. This research aims to address this gap by exploring how pinkwashing affects the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ consumers across psychological, emotional, and social dimensions.

2.4 Authentic Marketing as an Ethical Alternative

Key components in assessing authenticity include accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency, according to Nunes et al. (2021). This comprehensive framework suggests that consumers make complex judgments when evaluating authenticity in marketing, considering not only the accuracy of representation but also the alignment between brand values and actions.

Fulfilling the brand promise in an individual, consistent, and continuous manner is vital for building brand authenticity, as argued by Schallehn et al. (2014). This suggests that authentic marketing requires long-term commitment and alignment between marketing messages and organisational values, rather than seasonal or opportunistic engagement with LGBTIQ+ themes.

Turner et al. (2024) found that Gen-Z and LGBTIQ+ audiences are particularly critical of what they perceive as "rainbow washing," emphasising the need for brands to engage in more substantive and authentic forms of activism. This highlights the importance of authentic marketing approaches that go beyond surface-level representation to address meaningful issues and demonstrate genuine commitment to LGBTIQ+ communities.

2.5 Knowledge Gap and Research Questions

Despite growing interest in LGBTIQ+ marketing and increasing awareness of pinkwashing, there remains limited understanding of how inauthentic representation affects the psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ consumers. Tressoldi et al., (2023) suggest that further research is needed to explore additional variables that impact LGBTIQ+ consumer behaviour, particularly in cultural contexts that emphasise collective wellbeing over individual autonomy.

Furthermore, while authentic marketing has been proposed as an ethical alternative to pinkwashing, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in enhancing consumer trust and wellbeing within LGBTIQ+ contexts. This research aims to address these gaps by exploring the following research questions:

1. How does pinkwashing affect the psychological and emotional wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ consumers?
2. What role does pinkwashing play in shaping LGBTIQ+ consumer trust and scepticism toward corporate activism?
3. To what extent do LGBTIQ+ consumers differentiate between pinkwashing and authentic marketing efforts?
4. How does pinkwashing align (or fail to align) with ethical marketing principles and corporate social responsibility?
5. What factors influence LGBTIQ+ consumers' ability to identify pinkwashing in brand activism?
6. Can authentic marketing improve consumer wellbeing by fostering trust and ethical engagement?

3. Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, this research proposes a conceptual framework that links pinkwashing, authentic marketing, consumer trust, scepticism, and wellbeing. The framework posits that pinkwashing and authentic marketing represent opposite ends of a continuum of brand engagement with LGBTIQ+ communities, with distinct impacts on consumer trust, scepticism, and wellbeing.

The framework proposes that pinkwashing, characterised by superficial representation, inconsistent messaging, and short-term engagement, generates increased scepticism, decreased trust, and potential negative impacts on consumer wellbeing. In contrast, authentic marketing, characterised by genuine representation, consistent messaging, and long-term commitment, fosters increased trust, decreased scepticism, and positive impacts on consumer wellbeing.

This framework will be empirically tested through qualitative research methods, with the aim of refining and validating these proposed relationships and identifying additional factors that may influence the impact of marketing practices on LGBTIQ+ consumer wellbeing.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2006, 2008), which acknowledges the subjective nature of reality and the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena like pinkwashing and its impact on consumer wellbeing, as it allows for the emergence of theory from data while acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting this data.

The research will be conducted in two phases: a systematic literature review to establish theoretical foundations and identify research gaps, followed by primary research using CGT methods to develop and refine a conceptual framework linking pinkwashing, authentic marketing, and consumer wellbeing.

4.2 Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review will be conducted using comprehensive search strategies across key databases, including Scopus and EBSCO. The search will utilise the following keyword clusters:

- Sexual Identity Terms: (LGBTIQ* OR lesbian* OR gay OR bisexual* OR transgender* OR queer* OR intersex* OR "sexual identit*" OR "gender identit*" OR "gender expression" OR "sexual minorit*")
- Pinkwashing Terms: (pinkwash* OR "pink wash*" OR "rainbow wash*" OR "woke wash*" OR "pink dollar" OR "pink market*" OR "pink money" OR "lavender dollar")
- Authentic Marketing Terms: ("authentic marketing" OR "Marketing authenticity" OR "Brand authenticity" OR "authenticity in marketing" OR "genuine marketing" OR "transparent marketing" OR "brand authentic" OR "consumer trust")
- ("wellbeing OR well*being OR well-being OR consumer well*being" OR "consumer wellbeing" OR "consumer well-being" OR "psychological well*being" OR "emotional

well*being" OR "social well*being" OR "physical well*being" OR "financial well*being"
OR "eudaimonic well*being" OR "hedonic well*being")

The review will follow a structured process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant literature. Thematic analysis will be used to synthesise findings and identify key themes and gaps in the existing literature (Tomczyk, Brüggemann and Vrontis, 2024).

4.3 Primary Research Methods

4.3.1 Data Collection

Primary data will be collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes, face-to-face and online) with approximately 40 participants across various stakeholder groups (Charmaz, 2008). These groups include LGBTIQ+ consumers with diverse identities and experiences, marketing professionals with experience in LGBTIQ+ marketing, ethics and/or CSR experts, and LGBTIQ+ community leaders and advocates. The interviews will explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding pinkwashing, authentic marketing, and their impact on consumer wellbeing. Supplementary data will be collected through analysis of marketing materials and policy documents from brands engaging in LGBTIQ+ marketing.

4.3.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling will be used to recruit participants with relevant experiences and perspectives (Morse et al., 2016). The sampling strategy will aim for diversity in terms of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and geographical location, recognising the intersectional nature of LGBTIQ+ experiences. Initial participants will be recruited through LGBTIQ+ organisations, professional networks, and academic contacts. Subsequent participants will be identified through theoretical sampling, which involves selecting participants based on emerging concepts and categories to further develop the theory (Charmaz, 2006).

4.3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis will follow CGT principles, utilising a systematic coding process including open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The constant comparison method will be employed throughout analysis, comparing data within and across interviews to identify patterns, similarities, and differences (Boeije, 2002). This process will continue until theoretical saturation is reached, where new data no longer generates new insights or categories (Bowen, 2008). NVivo software will be used for data management and analysis, facilitating systematic coding and exploration of relationships between concepts and categories.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. The research will recognise the potential vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ participants and ensure supportive interview environments. Power dynamics between researchers and participants

will be acknowledged and addressed throughout the research process. All data collection and storage will comply with relevant data protection regulations and institutional policies.

5. Expected Contributions and Implications

This research will make significant academic contributions by developing a comprehensive framework integrating authentic marketing and consumer wellbeing within LGBTIQ+ contexts. It will advance ethical branding theory through consumer trust and identity perspectives while extending understanding of how marketing practices impact psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of consumer wellbeing. The methodological approach will contribute to approaches for researching sensitive topics within marketing ethics.

For marketing professionals and organisations, the research will provide practical guidelines for authentic inclusion in marketing engagement with LGBTIQ+ communities. It will offer actionable strategies for building consumer trust through value alignment and genuine representation while identifying potential pitfalls and ethical challenges in LGBTIQ+ marketing. The business case for authentic engagement with LGBTIQ+ communities will be demonstrated through empirical evidence.

The broader societal implications include promoting representation that validates diverse LGBTIQ+ identities and experiences, advancing inclusive representation in mainstream marketing, enhancing consumer literacy regarding authentic versus inauthentic brand activism, and contributing to more ethical marketing practices that support rather than exploit marginalised communities.

6. Conclusion

This research aims to critically examine the impact of pinkwashing on LGBTIQ+ consumer wellbeing and explore whether authentic marketing can serve as an ethical alternative. By developing and testing a conceptual framework that links pinkwashing, authentic marketing, consumer trust, scepticism, and wellbeing, this study will contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications within marketing ethics.

The findings will provide valuable insights for brands seeking to engage authentically with LGBTIQ+ communities while avoiding the pitfalls of pinkwashing. Furthermore, by advancing understanding of how marketing practices impact consumer wellbeing, this research will contribute to more ethical and inclusive approaches to LGBTIQ+ marketing.

In an era of growing consumer scepticism towards corporate activism and increasing demand for authentic brand engagement with social causes, this research addresses a timely and significant issue within contemporary marketing practice. By focusing on the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ consumers, it places ethical considerations at the centre of marketing discourse, advocating for approaches that genuinely serve these communities while achieving legitimate branding objectives.

7. References

1. Association of National Advertisers (2024) *2024 ANA LGBTQ+ Marketing Inclusion Report*. [Online] New York: Association of National Advertisers, Inc. Available at: <https://www.ana.net/miccontent/show/id/rr-2024-03-lgbtq-marketing-inclusion-report> [Accessed 30 March 2025].
2. Blackmer, C.E. (2019) "Pinkwashing", *Israel Studies*, 24(2), p. 171. doi: 10.2979/israelstudies.24.2.14
3. Boeije, H. (2002) "A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews", *Quality and Quantity*, 36(4), pp. 391–409. doi: 10.1023/a:1020909529486
4. Bowen, G.A. (2008) "Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: a research note", *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), pp. 137-152. doi: 10.1177/1468794107085301
5. Ceatha, N., Koay, A.C.C., Buggy, C., James, O., Tully, L., Bustillo, M. and Crowley, D. (2021) "Protective factors for LGBTI+ youth wellbeing: a scoping review underpinned by recognition theory", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(21), p. 11682. doi: 10.3390/ijerph182111682
6. Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
7. Charmaz, K. (2008) "Grounded theory as an emergent method", in Hesse-Biber, S.N. and Leavy, P. (eds.) *Handbook of emergent methods*. New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 155–172.
8. Χρησιτίδης, Ε.-Ο. (2024) "Η Ισότητα Στον γάμο, Το Pinkwashing Και Η Επόμενη Μέρα". [Online] EfSyn. Available at: https://www.efsyn.gr/stiles/apopseis/422961_i-isotita-ston-gamo-pinkwashing-kai-i-epomeni-mera [Accessed 11 April 2025].
9. Corbin, J.M. and Strauss, A. (1990) "Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria", *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), pp. 3-21. doi: 10.1007/bf00988593
10. Γρήγκοβιτς, Ε. (2024) "Κόντρα Σκέρτσου-Κουτσούμπα για τον γάμο ομοφύλων: απολιθωμένη η άποψή σας - είστε συνένοχοι στο pinkwashing". [Online] Protothema. Available at: <https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/1466947/kodra-skertsou-koutsouba-gia-ton-gamo-omofulon-apolithomeni-i-apopsi-sas-eiste-sunenohoi-sto-pinkwashing/> [Accessed 11 April 2025].
11. Hall, M.G., Lee, C.J.Y., Jernigan, D.H., Ruggles, P., Cox, M., Whitesell, C. and Grummon, A.H. (2024) "The impact of 'pinkwashed' alcohol advertisements on attitudes and beliefs: a randomized experiment with US adults", *Addictive Behaviors*, 152, p. 107960. doi: 10.1016/j.addbeh.2024.107960
12. Lewis, C., Mehmet, M. and Reynolds, N. (2024) "A narrative review of LGBTQ+ marketing scholarship", *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 32(3), pp. 239-262. doi: 10.1177/14413582241244486
13. Montecchi, M., Micheli, M.R., Campana, M. and Schau, H.J. (2023) "From crisis to advocacy: tracing the emergence and evolution of the LGBTQIA+ consumer market", *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 43(1), pp. 10-30. doi: 10.1177/07439156231183645
14. Morse, J.M., Bowers, B.J., Charmaz, K., Corbin, J., Clarke, A.E. and Stern, P.N. (2016) *Developing grounded theory*. New York: Routledge.

15. Nunes, J.C., Ordanini, A. and Giambastiani, G. (2021) "The concept of authenticity: what it means to consumers", *Journal of Marketing*, 85(4), pp. 1-20. doi: 10.1177/0022242921997081
16. Powell, N., Dalton, H., Bourne, J.L. and Perkins, D. (2024) "Co-creating community wellbeing initiatives: what is the evidence and how do they work?", *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 18(1), p. 26. doi: 10.1186/s13033-024-00645-7
17. Schallehn, M., Burmann, C. and Riley, N. (2014) "Brand authenticity: model development and empirical testing", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 23(3), pp. 192-199. doi: 10.1108/jpbm-06-2013-0339
18. Schulman, S. (2021) *Let the record show: a political history of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
19. System1 and WFA (2024) "Does LGBT+ visibility matter?". [Online] WFA. Available at: <https://wfanet.org/knowledge/diversity-and-inclusion/item/2024/07/24/system1-does-lgbt-visibility-matter-research> [Accessed 11 April 2025].
20. Tomczyk, P., Brüggemann, P. and Vrontis, D. (2024) "AI meets academia: transforming systematic literature reviews", *EuroMed Journal of Business*, (in press). doi: 10.1108/EMJB0320240055
21. Tressoldi, C., Espartel, L.B. and Rohden, S.F. (2023) "Authentic brand positioning or woke washing? LGBTQI+ consumer perceptions of brand activism", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 43(1), pp. 72-88. doi: 10.1108/edi-05-2022-0126
22. Turner, K.A., Craig, C.M., Brooks, M.E. and Villarreal, K.L. (2024) "Branding beyond the rainbow: an exploration of authentic advertising for Gen Z's LGBTQ+ community", *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 25(3). doi: 10.1353/asr.2024.a939144