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Advertising has come out: Viewers' perception of the portrayal of lesbian, gay, and transgender characters in advertising

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ABSTRACT

Research on LGBT-inclusive advertising has been limited to analyzing ad content and commercial effectiveness. This study focuses on viewers' perception of advertising featuring lesbian, gay, and transgender characters and its prosocial potential. It analyzes the open-ended answers given by participants involved in a survey experiment. These reveal their belief that advertising could support positive social change by normalizing sexual/gender minorities in everyday life. The findings underscore the nuances in audiences' critical view of the way in which individuals are represented. Avenues are suggested for further research on the prosocial potential of LGBT-inclusive advertising.

1. Introduction

In 2020, when the YouTube star Nikkie de Jager came out as transgender, the revelation immediately became worldwide news (Ritschel, 2020). The video with which the makeup artist revealed her male-to-female transition was watched 12,979,601 times in only twelve hours, after someone had "threatened to out her to the media" (Madani, 2020). Why would such a disclosure become trending news for worldwide audiences? Sexual and gender minorities have long been excluded by the media, as the scarce portrayal of homosexual and transgender characters in films and advertisements illustrates (Cabosky, 2017). Moreover, for decades, the media represented homosexual and transgender people only through stereotypical and comic portrayals targeting the heterosexual audience's laughs (Cabosky, 2017; Gross, 2005). Such representations, combined with the mass media's major role in processes of social definition, have supported many societies' prevalent gender system and conceptions of what is normal for men and women, hindering the possibilities of LGBT viewers to feel proud or viable (Gross, 1991). If today's media still portray a world where most are assumed to follow heteronormative ideals (Levina et al., 2000), Nikkie's revelation may have become newsworthy due to its deviation from mainstream content.

Media representation has been central to activists' struggle for societal visibility (Levina et al., 2000) and "a vital component" of LGBT studies for media scholars (Gross, 2005, 513). Since the eighties, organizations have aimed to increase media portrayals of the LGBT community to improve acceptance and thereby eradicate discrimination (GLAAD, n.d.). Considering that social minority groups remain relatively invisible for many people's first-hand experiences, the media's power to shape viewers' assumptions about these groups is considerably strong (Gross, 1991). If televised content cultivates a large part of viewers' beliefs on social reality and worldviews (Signorielli, 2009), it may be able to broaden people's views toward greater acceptance of the LGBT community

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(Fernández). Notably, in recent years, the mass media's representation of sexual and gender minorities has increased and become less stereotyping (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Gross, 2005). While for a long time, viewers accepted the encountered negative stereotypes as "representative of gay people" (Gross, 1991, 27), today's more positive LGBT media portrayals (Nölke, 2018) may be changing this.

Importantly, the diffusion of cultural views about social groups is not exclusive to a single type of televised content, since news, drama, and commercials support each other in diffusing mainstream values (Gross, 1991). While the visibility of homosexual and transgender characters on TV shows has been considered a good teacher of cultural citizenship, exposing viewers to diverse identities (Parsemain, 2019), the teaching power of other media content remains underexplored. In the case of movies, Mazur and Emmers-Sommer (2002) studied positive portrayals of same-sex couples in movies and argued that viewers' exposure to those movie portrayals positively affects their attitudes toward nontraditional families. However, as revealing as these conclusions are, there is still a need for research to go beyond the portrayal in television shows and movies, which is often content deliberately chosen by audiences with a positive predisposition. As Gillig et al. (2018) argue, shows with recurring LGBT characters are likely to be watched by audiences already supporting these groups. Instead, "brief storylines and one-time characters" can be particularly influential for conservative viewers who do not seek to consume storylines with, for example, transgender characters but encounter these depictions in single episodes or, as this study proposes, in advertisements (Gillig et al., 2018, 516). With the current study, the aim is to explore advertising's prosocial potential for elevating LGBT acceptance across wider audiences from the audience perspective.

1.1. Representation in advertising

Advertising rarely featured lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people fifteen years ago (Gong, 2020), however, this seems to be changing. The number of advertisements portraying sexual minorities has increased, arguably encouraging LGBT individuals' feelings of acceptance, despite advertisers' fears of backlash from conservative audiences (Nölke, 2018; Sheehan, 2014). Although LGBT-inclusive advertising has been explained as marketers' strategic response, for example, to gain the purchasing power of the homosexual market segment (Eisend & Hermann, 2019), the possibility of it being "a prosocial move" requires attention (Read et al., 2018, 193).

While several studies have described which LGBT subgroups advertising portrays most often and how (Cabosky, 2017; Nölke, 2018), content analyses overlook the reception of these advertisements and their potential role in challenging viewers' ideas (Tsai, 2010). The studies that have examined the reception of LGBT-inclusive ads have predominantly focused on their effects on audiences' attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Gong, 2020; Um, 2014, 2016). Although their findings were valuable, whether viewers of LGBT-inclusive advertising believe it can promote positive societal outcomes remains unanswered. Insufficient attention has also been given to the cultural contexts in which LGBT-inclusive advertisements are embedded (Eisend & Hermann, 2019) and, more particularly, how culture affects both the production and reception of LGBT-inclusive advertising (McDonald et al., 2021). Existing scholarship has repeatedly focused on North American samples (Oakenfull et al., 2008; Read et al., 2018; Um, 2016), despite the media's LGBT inclusion being particularly striking in certain countries, such as Argentina, surrounded by more conservative media environments in their region (Fernández). This study examines viewers' own experiences when exposed to this kind of advertising and their views on its prosocial potential in the Argentinian context.

1.2. Argentinian context

Following Eisend and Hermann's (2019, 381) call to consider how the "dynamics of support for homosexuality" vary across cultural contexts and moving beyond scholarship's privileged attention to the North American context, the focus was on Argentinian audiences. Despite Latin America being a region with high rates of violence toward LGBT individuals and where large religious groups block progress on LGBT rights (Corrales, 2019), sexual minorities' representation has come to occupy a considerable place in Argentinian mainstream media (Fernández). Remarkably, Argentina has been considered one of "the region's standard-bearers" regarding the expansion of LGBT rights (Corrales, 2019, 7) and a leading country in struggles for gender-inclusiveness (Schmidt, 2019). In news media, nonbinary language has been incorporated despite its rejection by the Royal Spanish Academy (Tosi, 2019), and a transgender woman has been appointed as news presenter for the national public broadcaster (Curia, 2020). In Argentinian entertainment media, at least since 2013, sexual minorities have been portrayed not stereotypically but in serious ways seeking to arouse viewers' emotions and understanding (Fernández). This differentiates the country's media and cultural landscapes from others in the region, such as Mexico or Brazil, where LGBT inclusion in the media has been censored (Fernández).

The increase and qualitative change in the country's mass media portrayal of sexual minorities have also been observed in advertising, as noted in a *Perfil* article in 2018 (henceforth referred to as "Publisexual" 2018). A change in paradigms in advertising and a trend toward more inclusive advertisements portraying homosexual and transgender characters have been widely covered in the news as "a time of risky advertising" (Sainz & Terrile, 2019), "the new advertising" (Bendersky, 2018), and "inclusive advertising" ("Publisexual" 2018).

Although parts of the Argentinian media and advertising sector have been progressive in creating and distributing LGBT-supportive content, the interplay between the values in advertising and society at large needs further scrutiny: Does this trend merely reflect the increase in societal acceptance of the LGBT community in Argentina, or could it also drive it? Between 2000 and 2017, Argentina's LGBT Global Acceptance Index (GAI) score rose from 5.8 to 6.9 (Flores, 2019). Since the maximum score on the GAI index is 10 and the maximum observed score was 8.9 (viz. Iceland), acceptance of the LGBT community could still be improved. The urgency for such an increase in acceptance is undeniable. Even in one of the Latin American countries with the most juridical advances (e.g., same-sex marriage, nonbinary IDs), invisibility in anti-corruption policies, discrimination, abuse of power by police forces, and violence

toward LGBT people in general, and transgender people especially, are major concerns (AFDA & Poder Ciudadano 2021).

1.3. Prosocial potential

The idea that mass media's recurrent content reinforces certain beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews among its audience has been discussed for decades under the "umbrella" of cultivation theory (Morgan et al., 2015, 676). As a "system of explanation of media effects" (Potter, 2014, 1030), cultivation theory suggests that the stories told through the media cultivate our beliefs and thoughts about the world (Morgan et al., 2015). Despite its original focus on the long-term effects of exposure to the stable macrosystems of televised content, originally studied in a less fragmented media environment than present (Potter, 2014), cultivation theory still provides a valuable perspective to analyze the relation between media exposure and viewers' conceptions of social reality (Morgan et al., 2015, 675). Cultivation theory can and has been utilized to study media effects on viewers' minority acceptance (for a thorough discussion, see Żerebecki et al., 2021), including acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Hefner et al., 2015).

Gender and sexual minorities' increasing visibility has been attentively observed by activists and scholars who claim that it plays a role in changing audiences' perceptions about them (Bond & Compton, 2015; Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007; Levina et al., 2000). While the generalized exclusion of sexual minorities from positive or nonstereotyping portrayals symbolically maintains the mainstream heterocis-normative moral order, their inclusion "opens up the possibility of making choices to people who might never otherwise have considered or understood that such choices could be made" (Gross, 1991, 30). These possibilities are not only valuable for LGBT individuals' feelings of acceptance (Nölke, 2018), but they may also promote other viewers' supportive attitudes toward these groups.

Although scholars have questioned the study of particular genres as cultivating viewers' beliefs, rather than assessing total TV exposure (Potter, 2014), there are reasons for focusing specifically on advertising. First, advertising serves as a key indicator of social recognition, as it depicts "idealized images of the material 'good life'" (Dittmar, 2007, 23), and it "does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be—life and lives worth emulating" (Schudson, 1984, 215). Second, advertising displays and, thus, endorses only *certain* values, attitudes, and behaviors while underrepresenting others (Pollay, 1987). Consequently, minorities' underrepresentation in advertising has been signaled as one of the causes of their lack of visibility in society and as a basis for the idea that they should be left on the margins (Sheehan, 2014). Third, advertisements can be watched by audience members unfamiliar with LGBT issues. While shows featuring recurring LGBT characters are often watched by viewers who already support sexual minorities, one-time narratives can be influential for conservative viewers who do not actively seek LGBT-inclusive storylines (Gillig et al., 2018). This makes advertising an appropriate field to explore viewers' perception of the media's prosocial cultivating potential.

Several studies have addressed the mass media's power to shape viewers' attitudes toward LGBT groups. Exposure to gay and transgender characters on television shows has been found to be positively correlated with viewers' supportive attitudes toward homosexual and transgender people, respectively (Bond & Compton, 2015; Gillig et al., 2018). In the idealized world of advertising, however, the effect is less clear. While sexual minorities' portrayals in advertising tend to increase when society is more supportive of them (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; McDonald et al., 2021; Nölke, 2018), the notion that advertising influences viewers' worldviews suggests that if diverse portrayals in advertising increase, societal support for diverse groups may consequently grow (Sheehan, 2014). This study acknowledges that advertising's formative cultural influence can go beyond sales goals (Pollay, 1987). However, it takes distance from assumptions that advertising's cultural influence is necessarily negative (Holbrook, 1987) or that it is a singly operating acculturation force creating changes in audiences. Instead, it acknowledges that cultural viewpoints may be more or less reinforced or promoted by advertising (McDonald et al., 2021) and that audiences themselves may hold their own relevant and critical views on this potential.

To date, previous research has found two features of LGBT-inclusive content related to viewers' attitudes toward it: the specific subgroup being portrayed and the characters' centrality in the story. Although gay and lesbian individuals are often generalized under umbrella-terms, such as the *gay population*, each subgroup faces different experiences and oppressions (Gross, 2005). This applies to their inclusion in advertising. Lesbian women's representation in advertising has been less than gay men's and, when existent, it has often been depicted with hypersexualized images to appeal to heterosexual male viewers (Nölke, 2018). Despite male heterosexual viewers' positive responses to those images, viewers are generally more used to seeing gay characters than lesbian and transgender characters, due to gay men's prevalent portrayal (Davis & Needham, 2008; Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Due to these differences, viewers judge gay and lesbian characters' portrayals differently (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Little is known in research about viewers' responses to media representations of transgender individuals (Gillig et al., 2018).

Quantitative studies have suggested that viewers' attitudes toward advertisements vary when sexual minorities are featured as central characters in the narrative or evenly combined with cisgender and/or heterosexual characters. Imagery in which homosexual identities are juxtaposed with heterosexual characters has been related to heterosexual viewers' positive responses (Eisend & Hermann, 2019). Viewers' reasons behind these preferences are, however, poorly understood. Expanding on these inconclusive findings, an explorative qualitative approach can reveal the underlying reasons with which viewers explain their preference for one type of advertisement or another.

1.4. The current study

This study's design includes advertisements featuring lesbian, gay, and transgender (LGT) individuals, a group highly exposed to violence and exclusion in the country (Páez et al., 2015). Given that advertisements featuring bisexual characters are yet particularly scarce (Tsai, 2010), the study's reliance on preexisting audiovisual advertisements precluded the inclusion of examples featuring bisexual characters. This was also the case for the absence of advertisements featuring nonbinary people, transgender men, and

lesbian, gay, and transgender women from racial/ethnic or other minorities.

While other studies have found that viewers' attitudes toward homosexuality positively correlated with their attitudes toward the inclusive advertisements they were exposed to (Read et al., 2018), it is necessary to explore what *other* factors viewers take into account when evaluating advertisements. For example, previous research suggests that other aspects, such as the LGT character's centrality in the plot, can also be relevant in viewers' attitudes toward the advertisement (Han & Tsai, 2016; Hooten et al., 2009). Seeking to unveil the other factors (besides attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities) that may relate to viewers' attitudes toward LGT-inclusive advertisements, as well as the prosocial potential they attribute to these ads, this study examines viewers' own exposure experiences as described by them. Thus, it takes into account the multiplicity of experiences that viewers have when watching LGT-inclusive content, for instance, how authentic they consider the content to be, how they (do not) identify with the characters, and/or how much disgust or hope they feel during the exposure (Gillig et al., 2018; Read et al., 2018).

As part of a larger mixed methods study conducted in 2020, 767 respondents living in Argentina participated in a survey comprising closed- and open-ended questions. The first part of the study consisted of a between-subjects experiment to explore what could be, if any, the possible prosocial effects of exposure. Each participant was exposed to *two* advertisements portraying lesbian, gay, or transgender individuals. They answered closed-ended questions on their attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities either before (control group) or after (experimental conditions) exposure. As expected, one single exposure did not significantly impact participants' attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities. However, the open-ended questions enabled respondents to express in-depth opinions about the two advertisements watched, LGT-inclusive advertising in general, and its prosocial potential. Their answers yielded some interesting insights that will be presented in this manuscript.

2. Methods

An online survey was used for both parts of the larger study, first, to explore what could be, if any, the possible prosocial effects of exposure and, second, to examine viewers' own evaluation of LGT-inclusive advertising and its prosocial potential. The use of anonymous online surveys, instead of in-person methods used in other studies to assess audience response to LGBT-inclusive advertising (Gong, 2020), decreased the likelihood of social desirability bias. The online survey was released after rephrasing the items that were not specific enough during the pretests and approval from the faculty's Ethics Review Board was obtained. When accessing the survey, respondents were given an informed-consent notice that explained the study's purpose, its focus on advertising's representation of certain social groups, and the voluntary nature of their participation and guaranteed their anonymity.

To study the prosocial effects of exposure, participants were put in three separate experimental conditions in the quantitative part of the study. Participants in the experimental conditions were randomly assigned to watch two preexisting advertisements portraying either a lesbian ($n = 188$), gay ($n = 189$), or transgender ($n = 194$) character. The control group ($n = 196$), which was subdivided into three subgroups, watched the same ads only after answering the first set of close-ended questions. Given that each participant was only exposed to two advertisements, out of the six ads in the study, they were able to give lengthy answers to the open-ended questions presented to them and finish the survey in between fifteen to twenty minutes.

To reduce the likelihood of social desirability bias, participants were initially broadly informed that the survey was about advertising's representation of social minorities, and the first advertisements were embedded in clips combined with ads portraying other groups (i.e., ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and overweight people). Once all participants in the experimental conditions had rated the first advertisements featuring a lesbian, gay, or transgender character in a leading role and answered closed-ended questions about their attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities, LGBT-inclusive advertising was presented as a theme for the remainder of the study. With participants informed about the study's specific focus, respondents were exposed to a second advertisement featuring the same group (i.e., a lesbian, gay, or transgender character) but now in a nonleading role along a larger number of characters. Each third of the control group was assigned to watch advertisements featuring either lesbian, gay, or transgender characters. After all participants had watched and rated two advertisements (one with and one without leading roles), open-ended questions were asked about their evaluation of the two advertisements and advertising's prosocial potential. Screenshots of the respective advertisements accompanied the questions to avoid confusion.

2.1. Sample

The questionnaire built on Qualtrics was opened by 1177 individuals. Sampling was purposive, seeking to have a diverse group of people further spreading the survey among adults of different ages, educational levels, genders, sexual orientations, and cities, all living in Argentina. This initial group included, for example, educational or institutional staff and social media influencers who shared the anonymous link with their followers. The survey was also shared in local Facebook groups for classified ads, which gathered thousands of people across cities. The sample was limited to people living in Argentina, as they were expected to have had comparable opportunities of exposure to the alleged inclusive trend in advertising in their everyday media consumption.

Respondents younger than eighteen years old ($n = 6$) or not residing in Argentina ($n = 25$) were forwarded to the end of the questionnaire. Cases corresponding to participants who dropped out of the survey were removed from the sample ($n = 379$). The valid sample comprised 767 respondents between 18 and 80 years old ($M_{\text{age}}=33.42$, $SD_{\text{age}}=13.17$), overcoming the limitations of previous studies exclusively focused on students' responses to LGBT-inclusive content (Clemente et al., 2013; Levina et al., 2000; Um, 2016).

Questions on age, highest educational level attained, and size of place of residence were included at the beginning of the survey. Questions on participants' religiosity, gender, sexual orientation, and interpersonal contact with LGBT individuals were included at the end, as these were more personal and sensitive aspects and could have alerted participants to the study's specific focus in advance.

Female participants constituted 65.3% of the sample, 33.2% of participants were male, and 1.4% preferred not to indicate their gender or chose other answers, such as “transgender woman”. In total, 81.7% of participants indicated being heterosexual, 11.1% self-identified as bisexual, 4.4% as either lesbian or gay, and 2.8% wrote other answers in a text box, such as “pansexual”. Of the participants, 58.8% had reached the university level, half of whom reported having completed it. There was a wide range in respondents’ level of religiosity, ranging from 1 (not religious at all) to 10 (very religious) ($M_{\text{religiosity}}=3.76$, $SD_{\text{religiosity}}=2.71$), and most respondents (i.e., 71.8%) lived in cities with more than one million inhabitants. Only 6.5% of respondents indicated not knowing any close friend, colleague or relative who is lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual, while more than half (i.e., 56.5%) reported having interpersonal contact with people self-identifying with two or three of these groups ($M_{\text{contact}}=2.20$, $SD_{\text{contact}}=1.14$).

2.2. Stimuli

The study included six audiovisual advertisements featuring gay men and lesbian and transgender women. Participants in Condition 1 were initially shown an advertisement by the ice cream brand Magnum, which portrays a lesbian woman walking down the aisle where her female bride waits for them to get married. Both brides are 20- to 40-years-old, smiling, with their hair styled and made-up, and dressed in white, arguably conforming to hegemonic standards of feminine beauty in the Argentinian cultural context. Samsung’s “The Future” was the second advertisement they watched. It shows futuristic scenes from the daily lives of different people, including a couple of smiling, young lesbian women in a seemingly middle-class household, who watch the ultrasound of their yet-to-be-born baby on their phone screen.

Participants in Condition 2 first watched an advertisement by the airline Aeroméxico in which a man meets another man at the airport, visibly his partner, with whom he hugs and kisses before boarding a plane together. Subsequently, participants watched an advertisement by Coca Cola in which diverse families, including a gay couple, single-parent, and adoptive families, are featured answering their children’s questions about their family being different. In both advertisements, the men look over 40 years old, wear sober clothes and have an appearance typical for the (upper) middle class Argentinian population. In Aeroméxico’s, the main character is driven to an airport, which may connote a higher-than-average economic status.

Participants in Condition 3 initially watched an advertisement by the bank Banco Provincia in which a transgender woman is visited at her hair salon by an older man who apologizes for having treated her badly in the past, while they smile at each other. They then watched Dove’s “Your Hair, Your choice”, where a voice-over talks about the freedom to choose according to one’s own desires, while different types of women appear on screen (an elderly woman surfing, a woman breastfeeding in public) including a transgender woman. In this condition the characters and context differed more than in the other conditions. The bank advertisement shows a traditional Argentinian village road, old cars and sepia tones. The main character, a trans woman about 50 years old, wears a work apron. The setting in Dove’s advertisement is a modern urban street where, like other characters, a (younger) trans woman walks in high heels, with long pink hair, holding a coffee cup.

The three advertisements featuring LGT main characters were similar in length (i.e., 1:30, 1:09, and 1:19 min) and the characters’ identification as lesbian, gay, or transgender was revealed in the video’s second half. In the second set of advertisements, LGT characters were featured among many other characters, without their sexuality being the central point in the advertisement. Neither the LGT characters nor the rest of the characters occupied leading roles. These advertisements lasted 1:00, 1:02, and 0:45 min. None of the advertisements included celebrities.

Participants’ evaluation of the advertisements was assessed by asking them which of the two watched advertisements they preferred and their reasons for preferring one advertisement over the other. Considering the varied ways in which each person can feel about the content they watch (Gillig et al., 2018), respondents were also asked to reflect on the following: “What thoughts or emotions did you experience while watching these advertisements?”, and “What aspects of the advertisement do you think provoked those thoughts and/or emotions?”.

Calzo and Ward (2009) argue that it is not a single exposure but increased and more frequent prior exposures to certain kinds of media genres (e.g., music videos, soap operas) that are associated with changes in attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, considering the importance that frequency of prior exposures can have on viewers’ attitudes, these were assessed by asking “Can you name brands and/or companies that included homosexual and/or transgender characters in their advertisements?”, “What was your opinion about those ads?”. These questions served as a bridge from ad-specific evaluations toward exploring participants’ evaluation of the “inclusive advertising” trend in general. Participants’ evaluation of the trend was further assessed by asking “What do you think about the inclusion of lesbian, gay, and transgender people in advertising, in general?”, and by asking participants for their opinion on whether and why they believed advertising can or cannot provoke a positive change in society.

To aid in the analysis, all responses to the open-ended questions were sorted per respondent in 767 Word documents and imported to Atlas.ti. Primarily data-driven codes were built to reduce the data and elucidate how the different fragments written by each respondent and the answers to each question across respondents related to each other. Answers were then thematically analyzed to identify the main explicit and implicit ideas, as well as their similarities, differences, and relationships. After analyzing 300 texts, the same codes continued to reappear, suggesting that the data saturation point had been reached, and the qualitative analysis was conducted with 390 texts (100 per experimental condition and 30 per control subgroup). The main themes in the data are presented below, indicating each quote’s source with the condition and participant number (e.g., C1, P1 for Condition 1, Participant 1).

3. Findings

Interestingly, the quantitative analyses of the closed-ended questions revealed that participants held considerable positive attitudes

toward homosexuality and transgender identities ($M = 4.61$, $SD=0.59$, on a scale from 1 representing less to 5 representing more positive attitudes). However, they did not show any significant effects of a single exposure to an advertisement on participants' attitudes toward LGBT-minorities. Hence, the qualitative analysis of participants' responses became essential to understand the different ways in which viewers perceived the LGT-inclusive advertisements.

3.1. Participants' evaluations of advertisements

Notably, when evaluating the specific advertisements they had watched, none but one of the participants explicitly mentioned the featuring of a lesbian, gay, or transgender character, in itself, as an explanation for negative or positive evaluations. Only one respondent negatively evaluated Samsung's ad by stating, "I do not agree with the maternity-paternity of homosexual couples" (C1, P257), suggesting that the featuring of lesbian characters in the scene was related to her negative evaluation of it. Other than in this case, the featuring of these gender and sexual minorities in the advertisement was not pointed out as an explanation for negative evaluations by the rest of respondents. In contrast, *the way* in which these characters were included and the role they occupied in the story were aspects repeatedly emphasized by a large portion of participants across all conditions.

The quantitative analyses revealed that participants in all three groups reported more positive attitudes toward advertisements not featuring any leading characters than toward advertisements where the lesbian, gay, or transgender character was the center of the story. The answers to open-ended questions revealed the reasons *why* participants preferred, in most cases, advertisements in which all characters occupied nonleading roles. In what follows, we explain participants' perspectives on overfocused and forced portrayals as negative and, in contrast, their evaluation of noncentral roles and more natural depictions as positive.

3.1.1. Negative comments about "forced" inclusion

Participants' evaluations of the advertisements were considerably guided by a principle repeatedly expressed across all conditions: The inclusion of sexual minorities, *per se*, should not be an advertisement's main focus nor should it be used by brands in an exaggerated way. Across all conditions, when participants considered that the inclusion of a lesbian, gay, or transgender character was excessively emphasized or, as a 25-year-old participant said about the bank's advertisement, "too forced of a situation for wanting to make it an inclusive advertisement" (C3, P7), this was negatively criticized. This evaluation was also expressed by participants watching Magnum's and Aeroméxico's advertisements who said, for example, "I think they are trying too hard to demonstrate that 'we are open-minded'" (C2, P152). By describing what they experienced during exposure, participants identified aspects that signal *when* an advertisement focuses too much on the inclusion of sexual minorities and on the sexual orientation of its characters.

First, advertisements in all categories were judged as too forcibly focused on inclusion when the connection between the story and the advertised brand was hard to believe, confusing, or made the brand too heroic a part of the story. This was particularly the case for Banco Provincia's ad, which, advertising a financial institution, was repeatedly accused of being false, opportunistic, and hard to believe because of the connection it proposes between a bank's loan and a man's apologies to a transgender woman, as a heterosexual female participant explained: "I think it is strange that because of receiving a loan he goes and asks her for forgiveness??? Very forced" (C3, P225). Far from being signs of incomprehension, these remarks pointed to viewers' dissatisfaction with the focus on inclusion when it had little to do with the advertised company: "The fact that the older man accepts the trans woman only because of the bank loan seems very out of place, they wanted to be inclusive and it turned out badly" (C3, P165). Criticisms of the lack of connection between the focus on inclusion and the rest of the story and the brand were also made by other participants who disliked Magnum's advertisement because "the whole video was forced, just to show that the protagonists' sexual choice is okay" (C4.1, P167). The forced connection between the brand, its slogan ("Pleasure is diverse"), and the focus on a lesbian couple was criticized by a 26-year-old bisexual respondent who expressed, "They convey that message of pleasure being diverse, whereas I do not think a marriage has strictly anything to do with pleasure. It kind of trivializes LGBT love to something that is just about pleasure" (C4.1, P144). Far from an exception, Aeroméxico's advertisement was also criticized for excessively emphasizing gay inclusion because there was "no need to clarify the sexuality of people who travel" (C2, P70). In the advertisement featuring gay men, dislike toward over-emphasized or dishonest inclusion was exacerbated by the brand's heroic claims: "they focus a lot on the gay person, showing off as being good for taking nonheterosexual people on trips, which currently should be the usual thing" (C2, P70). The focus on inclusion and on the brand as a hero was criticized as a pinkwashing practice since, as a gay man explained about Aeroméxico's advertisement, "If they truly were [inclusive], they would not need a special advertisement to show how inclusive they are" (C2, P353).

Second, advertisements in the three categories were seen as excessively emphasizing inclusion when the story was considered exaggerated, overdramatized, and lacking naturalness. The big production that made Magnum's advertisement feel "like a movie" (C1, P1) was especially judged as being too much and, therefore, not making the same-sex wedding seem natural: "Too much production... So much intrigue just to present a couple of women getting married. It continues to show the situation of two women getting married as something out of the norm" (C1, P142). This overproduced perception was also linked to the characters' hegemonic beauty: "The characters are too pretty, too young, both respond to a standard of female beauty that I do not think represents the majority of the community. The scene is too perfect, too much of a social class that is not for everyone" (C1, P226). Similarly, some participants thought that Aeroméxico's advertisement should not "dramatize being gay so much" (C2, P75) and, regarding Banco Provincia's, that it was "unnecessary to emphasize the character's role so much through clothing and makeup" (C3, P297).

3.1.2. Positive comments about "natural" inclusion

In contrast, advertisements that, according to participants, do not focus excessively on the inclusion of lesbian, gay, or transgender characters were widely celebrated. Participants exposed to the advertisements featuring lesbian women who preferred the one without

leading roles explained this was because it “did not need to put so much emphasis on gender issues” (C1, P16), and “homosexuality is not the aspect that gets all the attention but is presented as something more ‘normal’” (C1, P178). Three reasons explained these preferences. The first reason why Samsung’s, Coca Cola’s, and Dove’s advertisements were praised was because they featured a broad diversity of characters and situations. By doing so, the advertisements were seen not only as *talking* about diversity, but also as *reflecting* it: Coca Cola’s “advertisement more broadly represents the fact that all couples are fine ... By showing different families” (C2, P195). With a similar argument, Dove’s advertisement was preferred “because there are different types of women represented, it breaks a bit with stereotypes. There is no difference between trans and cis” (C3, P24) and “they are all in the same equality situation” (C3, P15).

Second, the three advertisements not focusing exclusively on LGT characters were positively evaluated for depicting them as one more among others, thereby naturally including them instead of further differentiating or distancing them: “I like that the couple is just one more in the whole and not something exceptional. That they’re not the main thing but one more part of the advertisement” (C4.1, P96). This also applied to Coca Cola’s advertisement, which “is inclusive in that the LGT is just part as one other option, it naturalizes it” (C4.2, P98), and Dove’s, in which, according to a heterosexual male respondent, “By not focusing on the transgender person, she is treated as ordinary, not as different” (C3, P26).

Third, participants positively evaluated advertisements that depict characters in simple, everyday life scenes. The depiction of ordinary situations, such as two women watching their phone in bed, was related by participants as unforced, more real, easier to relate to and not overacting characters. A 59-year-old participant preferred Samsung’s ad over Magnum’s because “the role of the women is more egalitarian. They are not staged. They are in a much more everyday role... Naturalness, charm ... It is just a home. There is no forced situation” (C1, P763). Additionally, in the case of Coca Cola’s ad, the scene’s naturalness was evaluated as positive for sexual minorities’ societal inclusion: “it takes that [the gay character’s inclusion] for granted as something quotidian, it makes it more agreeable, more natural” (C2, P328).

3.1.3. Other factors associated with participants’ ad evaluations

Among the factors valued by participants when evaluating the advertisements, some were not directly related to how they featured sexual and/or gender minorities. First, the aesthetics of the advertisement were marked as an explanation for liking or disliking at least five of the shown ads, regardless of the characters’ attributes. For example, the music, photography, and colors led to positive evaluations of Samsung’s ad by at least six participants who applauded the fast change of scenes, the background music, “the art and the fun” (C1, P373). In contrast, at least ten participants exposed to Aeroméxico’s advertisement manifested negative views about it by criticizing its “sad music” and “dull colors” (C2, P325).

These aesthetic characteristics were, in turn, closely related to a second factor with which participants explained their dislike for certain advertisements: The sensations and emotions conveyed. Several participants reported negative emotions, such as loneliness, sadness, nostalgia, and boredom. These negative emotions were not only mentioned in the case of Aeroméxico’s ad. More than fifteen viewers of Banco Provincia’s ad expressed negative views toward it because of the feelings it generated in them. These were mainly anger, rejection, and hatred toward the character of the old man, sadness, and in most cases, discomfort due to the plot. However, there were also examples of how positive emotions derived from the advertisement explained positive evaluations of it. Participants who positively evaluated the ads by Dove, Magnum, Samsung, and Coca Cola often praised their capacity to transmit “joy and freshness” (C3, P84), “fun and excitement” (C1, P137), “beauty and tenderness” (C4.1, P246) through the use of warm colors, joyful music, and, in Coca Cola’s, featuring of kids.

A third recurring explanation for the evaluation of the advertisements was participants’ prior personal inclination to be (un) interested in a certain theme. For example, approximately ten participants who expressed negative views of Samsung’s ad explained it by describing themselves as reluctant to use technology, skeptical about tech developments, pessimistic about remote interactions, or simply not interested in anything tech-related: “I am not very fond of technology ... that’s why I’m conditioned and it didn’t generate any emotions in me” (C1, P28). These manifestations of uninterest and indifference toward the ad’s theme were contrasted by a few positive evaluations by participants fond of futuristic scenes, in the case of Samsung’s ad, and weddings, in the case of Magnum’s. Affinity toward the theme contributed to positive evaluations of Magnum’s advertisement by those who “like weddings” (C1, P77), appreciate representations of “love in romantic ways” (C1, P346), and place marital commitment high in their “order of values” (C1, P149).

Finally, participants also evaluated the advertisements based on the opportunity they provided to feel related and empathize with the characters and the story, regardless of their own gender and sexual orientations. In a few cases, participants evaluated an ad negatively by stating that “I don’t feel identified” (C2, P342) and expressing, in relation to Aeroméxico’s ad, “Disinterest in the life of a businessman with a wealthy background” (C2, P224). Identification and empathy were sources of positive evaluations for female respondents exposed to Dove’s ad and for some viewers of Banco Provincia’s ad: “I felt it as a situation closer to my reality, maybe because of the small village environment, like the one I live in, I could picture my grandfather being the old man in the ad” (C4.3, P315).

3.2. Participants’ evaluation of the trend and its prosocial potential

Beyond their evaluation of the shown advertisements, 34.6% of participants mentioned that they had perhaps watched other advertisements featuring sexual minorities in the past, and 52.9% were certain that they had been exposed to that type of advertising. Together, the participants mentioned more than fifty brands that have launched LGBT-inclusive advertisements. A 2019 ad by Sprite was the most often mentioned. Ads by the webshop Mercado Libre, furniture store Arredo, and cosmetics company Natura were frequently recalled by participants. Reactions to those previously watched advertisements were both positive and negative, with some

participants stating that they “loved” (C2, P348) those advertisements and others expressing negative and/or critical views.

Respondents observed changes in how advertising represents sexual minorities. A markedly small portion regarded this trend as absolutely negative, with one participant expressing, “I don’t think it is necessary to always put a gay, a lesbian, a trans in... It bothers me. It is a negative change. It is unnatural.” (C2, P22). Others, instead, highlighted the limitations of this approach to inclusivity, observing that “Inclusion is not only in terms of gender, I think we also have to include people with different abilities, motor disabilities, blindness, deafness, etc. That is also inclusion” (C1, P17). A larger portion of participants celebrated advertising’s rising inclusivity: “It is perfect... In the past, advertisements used to include them only to make fun of them, but I see now a great advance as a society” (C4.1, P322), expressing a critical recognition that not all forms of representation, especially older ones, are equally good. Although brands’ motivations to include LGBT characters were questioned by some participants (e.g., “clearly they’re not doing it to support minority social movements but to capture more market” C1, P764), the trend’s potential to provoke societal changes was more agreed upon.

3.2.1. *Potential for normalization*

When asked whether they thought inclusion in advertising could lead to positive societal changes, 75.9% of participants answered that it could lead to moderate or even strong societal changes. Participants then explained *why* they thought inclusion in advertising can (or cannot) lead to positive societal changes, with variations in the type of change described and the degree to which it was seen as possible. Along with the most skeptical ones who considered it impossible for advertising to generate any change because it cannot “change LGT people’s material reality” (C3, P753), were those who considered that advertising helps but is insufficient. According to them, changes in legislation, policies, education, and domestic conversations must accompany the advertisements for positive societal changes to happen. A fraction of these participants, however, acknowledged that advertising plays an important role with respect to those other areas because it puts the issue on the public agenda: “advertising helped, at some point, to get the topic on everyone’s lips, it’s something that makes up the agenda for many legislative and academic projects” (C4.3, P244) and because it sparks debates and “the beginning of conversations” (C4.2, P14). Other participants, instead, assigned a greater and direct power of influence to advertising: “Advertising is a gigantic tool to generate ideas, desires, needs and behind them, behaviors and ways of relating” (C4.2, P755).

Taking a rather intermediate position was the large number of participants who stated that advertising’s inclusion of sexual minorities can help familiarize viewers with what they have no direct contact with, getting them used to seeing gender and sexual minorities as part of an everyday ordinary reality:

It would have a positive impact because it helps normalize it ... Then, the LGBT person looking at it feels normal and the non-LGBT person begins to see them as normal, until eventually they stop questioning what’s normal and what isn’t, and just accept each other as they are. (C4.1, P144)

Most participants who expressed that advertising can provoke positive social changes conferred upon advertising the ability to normalize and naturalize, in other words, to make sexual minorities part of the mainstream: “we adopt as normal what we see or watch frequently, and, generalizing, we currently consume a lot of advertising through tv, social media, internet” (C4.3, P3), “it enables us ... to naturalize others’ ways of being and living” (C4.2, P170).

3.2.2. *Conditions for normalization*

Participants’ evaluation of inclusive advertising as having positive societal outcomes did not equate to an assessment of the trend as inherently positive. Beyond participants who succinctly stated that inclusion in advertising is “absolutely necessary” (C2, P135) and “should not even be discussed” (C2, P203), many other participants were more critical when evaluating the trend. Instead, they suggested that the celebrations of rising inclusion should be nuanced, as “we are no longer in a year where inclusive advertising should still be treated as some kind of ‘hero and pride’” (C1, P118). In detail, participants mentioned several aspects that must be considered for advertising’s LGBT inclusion to be truly positive.

First, according to participants, inclusive advertising should narrow the differences more than it widens them. The trend was evaluated negatively if advertising “emphasizes the being different, marginal or transgressor” (C3, P759). That is why participants explained that it is key to observe not only *who* is included but also *how* that inclusion takes place. Participants judged advertising’s rising inclusivity as positive only as long as it portrays minority characters “as societal actors” (C2, P75), “as part of everyday normal life” (C2, P48), instead of only as minorities: “I feel they are forced, just politically correct. I’d rather see the transgender character being included simply because they are a person and not because of their condition, that advertising wouldn’t be only about their choice” (C4.1, P155).

Second, advertising’s inclusion of sexual minorities was considered as potentially positive, as long as it is not merely done for commercial purposes to improve a brands’ image. Several participants expressed concerns about “the market appropriating the struggles and ‘embellishing’ them, leaving aside LGTBIQ people’s real struggle process” (C3, P6). Those who accepted commercial benefit and considered it “inevitable” (C1, P16) also emphasized the need to accompany advertising with real material actions: “They [the ads] shouldn’t serve to keep companies up to date with society’s demands while, on the other hand, less visibly they do nothing (e.g., making advertisements with trans people but not having any trans employees)” (C2, P766).

4. Conclusion and discussion

Advertising’s increasing inclusion of sexual minorities has recently attracted considerable attention from scholars and news media.

Among the latter, some argue that advertisements worldwide, and in Argentina particularly, are challenging prejudices, breaking taboos, and echoing the LGBT community's demands (Sainz & Terrile, 2019). Scholarship, however, has remained restricted to studying the contents and commercial effects of these advertisements, overlooking viewers' own evaluations of the advertisements and of their prosocial potential (Sheehan, 2014).

4.1. Major findings

The analysis of answers to open-ended questions in our study revealed some of the multiple factors that participants considered when evaluating the ads, beyond their prior attitudes toward the sexual and gender minorities featured. Having not found significant cultivation effects of a single advertisement exposure on participants' attitudes, we did find that participants' evaluations of the advertisements were thoughtful, critical, and not as related to inclusion per se, as they were related to *the ways* in which lesbian, gay, or transgender characters were featured. Most participants expressed a preference for ads that did not have any leading roles. Had this not been explored further, that finding would have appeared to be in line with previous research. Han and Tsai (2016) found that heterosexual viewers preferred ads that juxtapose and integrate heterosexual and homosexual characters in the same story in a compatible manner rather than ads exclusively targeted at homosexual viewers. The authors suggest that the unfavorable responses of heterosexual viewers to ads exclusively featuring minority characters are associated with their lack of felt targetedness, a decrease in perceived similarity, and an unfamiliar feeling of being excluded from advertising (Han & Tsai, 2016). Unlike the explanations given by that study, the findings of our analysis revealed that there are other factors that may better explain heterosexual viewers' preference for one type of advertising over another, beyond the alleged reluctance to be excluded from advertising. Instead, it was found that participants considered more societally positive the inclusion of sexual minorities in not overly emphasized ways but in more natural, nondramatized depictions, truly inclusive of LGBT individuals as one more among others, rather than as an exception or outlier. These findings illustrate the value of supplementing quantitative reception studies with qualitative analyses to understand the reasons behind viewers' preferences. They also reveal the nuanced, and often critical, way in which viewers evaluate LGBT-inclusive advertising, rather than being simply in favor or against it.

A nuanced and critical evaluation was also found in participants' views on the prosocial potential of LGBT-inclusive advertising. Most participants believed that it is possible for this advertising to lead to positive societal outcomes. However, rather than communicating complete certainty that this kind of advertising is intrinsically either good or bad for society, many participants elaborated on the conditions this advertising must meet to bring positive societal outcomes. First, participants believed that advertising could lead to positive societal changes only as long as it includes the LGBT character as one of more social actors, without emphasizing what is different, exaggerating their role, or 'othering' these LGBT characters. Second, the vision was that advertising will hardly lead to positive societal change if it is merely used as a symbolic smokescreen or promotional distraction by companies while they, in turn, do little to change people's material reality.

4.2. Suggestions for future research and practical implications

As expected, the quantitative analysis after one single exposure did not lead to significant variations in viewers' attitudes. However, participants in this study were able to recall more than fifty other brands that featured sexual minorities in their advertisements. Based on this, it is suggested that further research should examine the effect of viewers' previous overall exposure, assessing, for instance, whether people who have been more exposed to inclusive advertising in the past are those who have more positive attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities. Moreover, considering insights from social identity theory suggesting that viewers report more positive attitudes toward advertisements featuring members of the in-group to which they belong (Read et al., 2018), further studies should increase LGBT representation in the sample to assess how viewers' sexual and gender orientation relates to their evaluation of LGBT-inclusive advertisements.

Given that advertising's representation of other LGBT subgroups, such as transgender men and bisexual people, has been virtually nonexistent (Tsai, 2010), further work is required to assess whether an increase in these portrayals is observed and whether this study's findings apply to viewers' evaluations of advertisements featuring other sexual minorities. Importantly, the role of intersectionality in media production and reception also needs to be examined (Eguchi et al., 2014; Smith-Frigerio, 2018): What combinations of identities are represented, and how are various combinations of identities perceived by the audience? Among others, intersections between sexuality and race/ethnicity, class, and gender are highly relevant. Do audiences, for instance, react differently to representations of transgender women than to transgender men? Some of the critical reflections from our participants about the characters' hegemonic beauty and high-class appearance in two of the less liked advertisements point to the fact that these dimensions also influence their attitudes. However, the setup of the current study did not allow for a complete disentanglement of respondents' reactions toward different kinds of LGBT representations because they were exposed to only two advertisements. However, we strongly concur that such nuances need to be added in future research.

The qualitative findings are not all-encompassing. There are surely other factors and modes of evaluation that viewers take into account when exposed to advertisements. Research should assess whether other evaluations are found in cultural contexts less supportive of homosexuality and transgender identities, where laws guaranteeing LGBT rights and media representations are less common. When comparing Argentina's 6.9 LGBT Global Acceptance Index (GAI) score to the GAI score of its neighboring countries, it is similar to that of Brazil (i.e., 6.8) and Chile (6.7) but considerably lower than that of Uruguay (7.6) and considerably higher than that of Bolivia (5.4) and Paraguay (5.2) (Flores, 2019). Because culture affects both the production and reception of LGBT-inclusive advertising, it is likely that even within Latin America alone, great differences in evaluations exist. In addition to comparing

evaluations across regions and countries, it is also recommended that research should focus on specific demographic groups within countries, such as older and more religious people and people with no interpersonal contact with LGBT individuals, which proved to be variables significantly influencing participants' attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities.

From this study, considering participants' remarkably positive attitudes toward homosexuality and transgender identities, advertisers' concern with a backlash from heterosexual viewers (Sheehan, 2014) may no longer be well-founded, at least in the Argentinian context. However, the findings also suggest that the inclusion of sexual minorities, when done with the sole aim of showing inclusiveness and bringing the focus to the inclusion itself, can be misguided. Given that participants negatively judged advertisements overfocusing on the sexual minority or excessively emphasizing inclusion, advertising practitioners are advised to consider presenting sexual minorities in natural ways, simply as social actors among others. Furthermore, advertising practitioners should consider that the trend toward inclusiveness cannot be evaluated as positive in itself. It will only be evaluated positively by viewers insofar as it narrows the differences more than it emphasizes them and is accompanied by material actions beyond the brand's promotion. Finally, the news media should also be cautious before celebrating advertising's inclusiveness in advance, as participants' responses evidenced that *who* is represented is not as important as *how* they are represented when assessing a trend in advertising.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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