

*Original Paper*

# LGBTQ and Consumption Trap: Sexual Minority and Rainbow Products—Why Do You Not Want to Buy Rainbow Products Anymore?

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## **Abstract**

*With the emergence and the development of the power of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer), some companies and brands have tried to promote their products under the banner of LGBTQ, or take advantage of LGBTQ-identifying celebrities to endorse them. The products used in the promotion methods, known as rainbow products, have made a lot of profit in the past, although many individuals (including heterosexuals) now show distaste for such promotion strategies. The objective of this research is to examine what people think of rainbow products in a branding context, and why they do or do not want to purchase these specific products. By means of an empirical analysis, a quantitative method is used. Participants (n=229) from China(mainland) and Australia are given a survey to gauge their experiences and attitudes toward rainbow products. The results show that (1) most participants reported that they would not purchase any rainbow products if they only had a spiritual use. (2) The attitude toward rainbow products is more conservative. (3) When people want to purchase rainbow products, the majority pay much attention to the attributes of the products themselves, such as quality, price, and practicality, instead of spiritual use.*

## **Keywords**

*LGBTQ, Rainbow Products, Promotion Strategy, Attitude, Purchase Behavior, Progressive Branding*

## **1. Introduction**

Rainbow products refer to products that are promoted under the context of LGBTQ or are endorsed by LGBTQ celebrities. Rainbow products have become much more popular over the past few years: with the LGBTQ movements becoming widespread and accessible, people are more and more willing to buy rainbow products. Furthermore, the LGBTQ community is being represented and targeted by a variety of

brands (Shepherd et al., 2021). The LGBTQ community is one of the lucrative market segments that have attracted the attention of organizations with a budget of US\$3.7 trillion (Ram et al., 2019). However, such commercial behavior is not always effective; for example, Campbell's and Wells Fargo received backlash for using same-sex parents in their advertisements (Nichols, 2015). The attitudes toward ads featuring same-sex couples tend to vary according to one's political ideology; for example, conservatives often rate such ads lower in brand sincerity (Shepherd et al., 2021). Despite this, many brands and companies still promote their products under the context of LGBTQ due to the large market and profit. Although, gender portrayals in advertisements have been a common subject for many years (Taylor, 2022), in China (mainland), because of the strict advertising codes and the unequal status of LGBTQ individuals, such ads are comparatively rare. Despite this, there is a large LGBTQ population in China (about 86.8 million people), and many companies and brands still exploit the label of "rainbow products" to attract LGBTQ individuals to purchase.

Badgett (1997) uses the term "dream market" to describe the gay market because they do not have children and have a larger disposable income (Schofield & Schmidt, 2005). The situation is similar for lesbians and other sexual minorities. Particularly in the fashion industry, gay men tend to place a higher value on image, appearance, and fashion consumption than their heterosexual counterparts (Altaf et al., 2012; Dodd et al., 2005).

However, the situation has now changed greatly, especially after COVID-19, and the attitude toward consumption varies dramatically. The propensity to consume among urban residents showed a downward trend after the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Shi & Huang, 2021), and such change has also been seen among LGBTQ consumers all over the world, as COVID-19 has spread rapidly, disrupting all sectors of life in various countries (Marina et al., 2023). Many people lost their jobs, went bankrupt, or became homeless during the pandemic; therefore, after the pandemic, the attitude to consumption has become more cautious. Individual's awareness of consumption is more rational in China now, according to Li (2023), only 1.1 percent of individuals said that they would consume excessively, and 69.1 percent individuals expressed that they would deposit their money into a bank, aside from basic living costs. In this situation, attention toward rainbow products among the LGBTQ community has been reducing, with individuals paying more attention to products' practical value rather than their spiritual value.

In this study, the author focus on two questions:

- 1) What do people think of rainbow products? Do they think they should buy them to support the LGBTQ community?
- 2) Why do they not want to purchase rainbow products? What is their purpose?

To answer these two questions, the author advances the following predictions:

H1: With the emergence and the development of the power of LGBTQ, peoples' attitudes toward rainbow product will become more progressive.

H2: People will buy rainbow products to support LGBTQ.

## 2. Research Problem and Gap

Although a significant amount of research on LGBTQ individuals and their market (including external factors such as religion) is conducted, LGBTQ and rainbow products are largely overlooked. Much research has been focused on LGBTQ individuals' ability to consume universal products, although like the LGBTQ community itself, the importance of rainbow products goes without saying.

The aforementioned researchers considered the merchandise providers' behavior and the LGBTQ individuals' buying behavior; nevertheless, they overlooked the specific products to which LGBTQ buyers may pay the most attention, rainbow products. However, the truth is that more and more brands use LGBTQ labels to promote their products, so exploring the LGBTQ consumers' attitudes and behavior toward rainbow products is increasingly necessary.

## 3. Literature Review

The homosexual movement, together with the homosexual market, generate and reproduce the subculture of homosexuals (Wang, 2016). Consumer behavior is a highly important factor in identifying their identities and communities. The research on LGBTQ and consumption is currently focused on the following topics: (1) the consumption ability of LGBTQ individuals and the comparison with that of heterosexuals; (2) the relationship among LGBTQ, religion, and/or political preference in consumption; and (3) the LGBTQ community and advertising (including commercial and public service advertisements).

### 3.1 *The Consumption Ability of LGBTQ Individuals and the Comparison with that of Heterosexuals*

LGBTQ individuals are consumers and also objects to be consumed in the marketplace. Much of the research has been focused on the consumption ability of LGBTQ individuals and the comparison with that of straight people. As mentioned earlier, in some specific areas, the consumption ability of LGBTQ individuals is indeed much higher than that of heterosexuals.

Diego Rinaldo (2007) suggests that fashion speaks to men as well, and the resulting convergence in style between straight and gay men has resulted according to some social observers such as in the decreased reliability of the "gaydar", the emic term employed in the gay subculture of consumption to refer to the ability to identify sexual orientation from style-related consumption (Rinaldo, 2007). As he says, people cannot distinguish each other by their fashion style, so how to consume and what to consume is an important way to delineate their identities. In some specific areas, such as cosmetics, clothes, ornaments, and jewelry, the difference in consumption habits between LGBTQ and straight people is larger than in other industries.

Another interesting consumption area is drugs; the rates of drug consumption are higher among LGBTQ populations (Pienaar et al., 2020). For example, illicit drug use is known to be more prevalent among the LGBTQ population than among heterosexual individuals in Western countries (Roxburgh et al., 2016). Furthermore, some researchers focus on the quality of subcultural (including LGBTQ) consumption (e.g., Kates, 2002; Kates, 2004), but with the advent of the consumer era, the research into consumer quality is

becoming increasingly scarce, and people are beginning to pay more attention to consumption quantity, which is unfortunate.

### *3.2 The Relationship among LGBTQ, Religion, and/or Political Preference in Consumption*

Religion, sexual orientation, and political preference are important topics in regards to LGBTQ. In the topic of consumption, the most controversial aspect is the conflict between LGBTQ and Christianity. Research on dissociative reference groups suggests that consumers take action to avoid being associated with a social group conflicting with their core social values (White & Dahl, 2007). For example, people in Australia who strongly support Labour will take action to avoid associating with the Liberals. Therefore, when conflicts among sexual orientation, religion and/or political preference arise, the consumptive actions that LGBTQ individuals take are worth discussing. Based on this, several religions strongly advocate against LGBTQ orientation (Minton et al., 2017). For example, Christian or Muslim service providers may refuse to serve LGBTQ groups.

The protection of LGBTQ rights is in effect all over the world, and political preference is one of the most important factors that can distinguish one from others, especially on the topic of LGBTQ rights. A survey in the US conducted by Kaiser shows that the millennial generation leans more toward liberal than conservative, especially on issues of abortion and LGBTQ rights (2017). Binnie (2010) also examined the sexual politics of neoliberalism in Poland, showing the relationship among politics, neoliberal economics, class, and LGBTQ rights. As regards the consumption area, Shepherd, Chartand, and Fitzsimons find that there is a relationship between political ideology and LGBTQ on the topic of brand sincerity. An ad featuring a same-sex (vs. opposite-sex) couple is rated lower in brand sincerity by conservatives (2021).

### *3.3 The LGBTQ Community and Advertising (Including Commercial and Public Service Advertisements)*

Gender portrayals in ads have become commonplace. Brands and companies use gender issues to attract attention because these issues are controversial and eye-catching. For example, a drinking brand in China called “Coconut Palm” features females with the slogan: “I drink it from small to big,” which refers to the breasts. Researchers are now also looking at gender issues, including female, male, and LGBTQ issues (Taylor, 2022). As a tool to promote the information on merchandise, ads showed a positive response to homosexual individuals in the early twentieth century (Wang, 2011). As the LGBTQ lifestyle has gained increased acceptance among mainstream consumer groups, many merchandise providers tailor their marketing strategies to align with LGBTQ consumers (Coetzee, 2023). However, such ads are not always effective; heterosexual men exposed to LGBTQ (particularly lesbian and gay)-themed ads tend to have negative responses (Madinga, 2020). Excluding use of gender issues in ads, the consumer target of many brands are LGBTQ individuals; thus they also pay attention to the topic of how to attract LGBTQ consumers.

Millennial audiences are more pro-LGBTQ+ and care more deeply about queer issues than prior generations (Foret, 2023). Foret uses case studies based on three corporation pride campaigns (Target,

Nike, and CVS) and finds that they all gained popularity (2023). Not only these three corporations, but also many other corporate brands have implemented LGBTQ+ issues into their marketing strategy to gain more profit.

However, researchers overlook the LGBTQ context usage of rainbow products, and such studies are still lacking; this study, in which the author focuses on the attitude toward rainbow products, can give some basic information to inspire further study.

As for public service ads for LGBTQ issues, such research is rare now. Kerrigan and Vanlee suggest that public service broadcasting and its centrality to cultural diversity has been established concerning race, multiculturalism, and gender, but LGBTQ sexual identity remains relatively absent from research (2022). Thus, this is another area that needs to be discussed.

## **4. Method**

### *4.1 Participants*

The author recruited participants from WeChat (a Chinese social media platform), QQ Group (a Chinese social media platform), Qualtrics (a research tool of the University of Melbourne), and Instagram. Finally, the author collected 209 results from China (mainland), of which 208 questionnaires were valid, and 28 results from Australia, of which 21 questionnaires were valid.

### *4.2 Materials*

The questions from one to six are all about demographics, including age, gender, sexual orientation, education, marital status, and disposable income.

The seventh question asked: "Would you choose to purchase a product because it is a rainbow product (even if you do not need it)?"

The eighth question asked: "Have you ever purchased rainbow products?"

The ninth question asked: "What are the rainbow products you have purchased before?"

The tenth question asked: "If you have chosen a product that you had never purchased before (and will not purchase in the future), what is the reason for that?"

The eleventh question asked: "If you have chosen a product that you have bought before, but will not buy it again, what is the reason for that?"

The twelfth question asked: "If your answer to question 8 is 'yes, I have and will continue to purchase' ('or I will purchase in the future'), what is the reason for that?"

## **5. Results**

The samples collected from China (mainland) are shown in Table 1. The demographic traits are also shown. As shown, participants were mostly under forty years old, were female, were straight, and were undergraduates.

**Table 1. Sample (from China) Profile**

Age	Number
18-22	74
23-30	82
31-40	38
41-50	13(-1)
Over 50	2
Total	209(-1)

Gender	Number
Male	69
Female	128(-1)
Nonbinary	12
Total	209(-1)

Sexual Orientation	Number
Straight	132
Gay	22
Lesbian	8
Bisexual	36
Transfer	5
Queer	3
Other	3(-1)
Total	209(-1)

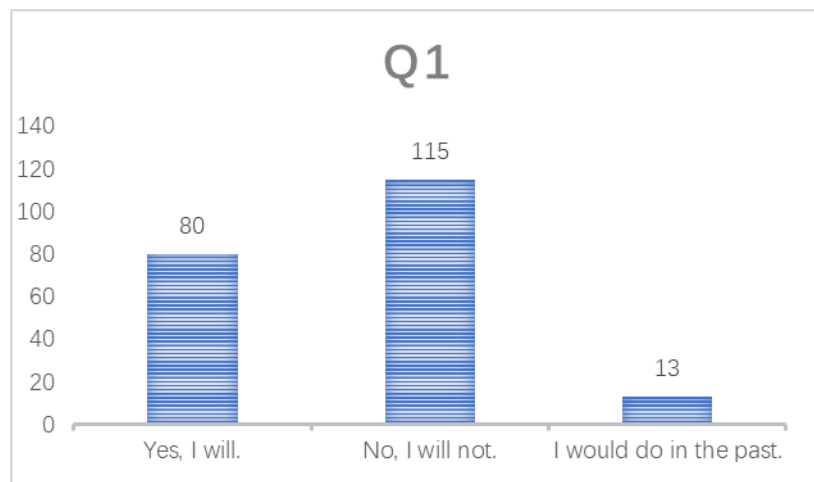
Education	Number
Primary	2
Secondary	10
Undergraduate	157(-1)
Graduate	39
Other	1
Total	209(-1)

Marriage and Relationship Status	Number
Married	57(-1)
In relationship but not married	59
Single or divorced	93
Total	209(-1)

Monthly Disposable Income (in CNY)	Number
Under 2000	55
2000-4000	60
4000-6000	43
6000-10000	32
Over 10000	19(-1)
Total	209(-1)

When participants were asked, “Would you choose to purchase the products because they are rainbow products (even if you do not need them)?”, 115 participants said NO and 13 participants said “I would have done in the past”, which means that people’s attitudes toward rainbow products are more conservative; they will not purchase rainbow products just because they are “rainbow.”



**Figure 1. Q1: Would You Choose to Purchase the Products because They Are Rainbow Products (Even if You do not Need Them)?**

When participants were asked, “Have you purchased rainbow products?” 118 participants said NO, and

76 participants said YES. The interesting thing is that 72 participants said they would not buy rainbow products in the future, among whom, 40 participants had purchased rainbow products before. This suggests that the evaluation of rainbow products is worse in people who have bought them before, which means they regret buying rainbow products.

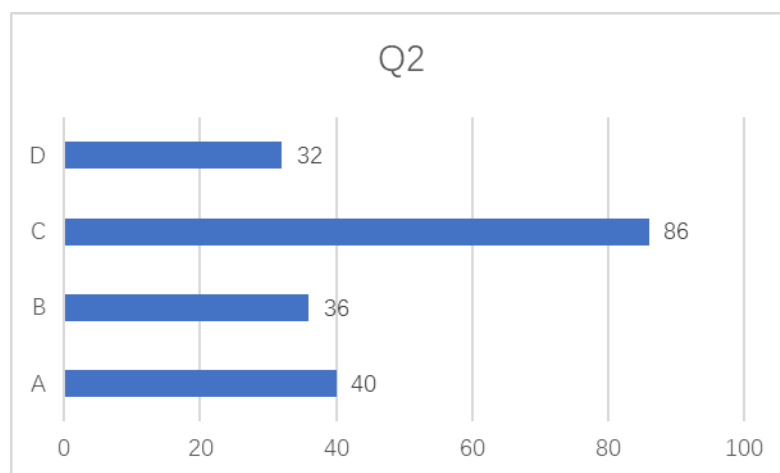
Q2: Have you purchased rainbow products?

A: Yes I have, but I will not buy them in the future.

B: Yes I have, and I will also buy some in the future.

C: No I have not, but I will buy some in the future.

D: No I have not, and I will not buy them in the future either.



**Figure 2. Q2: Have You Purchased Rainbow Products?**

When participants were asked, “Why you do not want to buy rainbow products in the future?”, the most common response was “The products are not practical, and I do not need them.” This suggests that people are rational as regards rainbow products, and they pay more attention to their practical value rather than spiritual value. The second most common response was “I think they are gimmicks and strategies, and I do not think they support LGBTQ,” which means people are negative toward products that use the “rainbow” label.

Q3: No matter whether you purchased rainbow products before, why do you not want to buy them in the future?

A: I think they are gimmicks and strategies, and I do not think they really support LGBTQ.

B: The products themselves are not practical, and I do not need them.

C: The product price is too expensive for me to afford.

D: I have not come out yet, and I am afraid others will know that I have bought rainbow products.

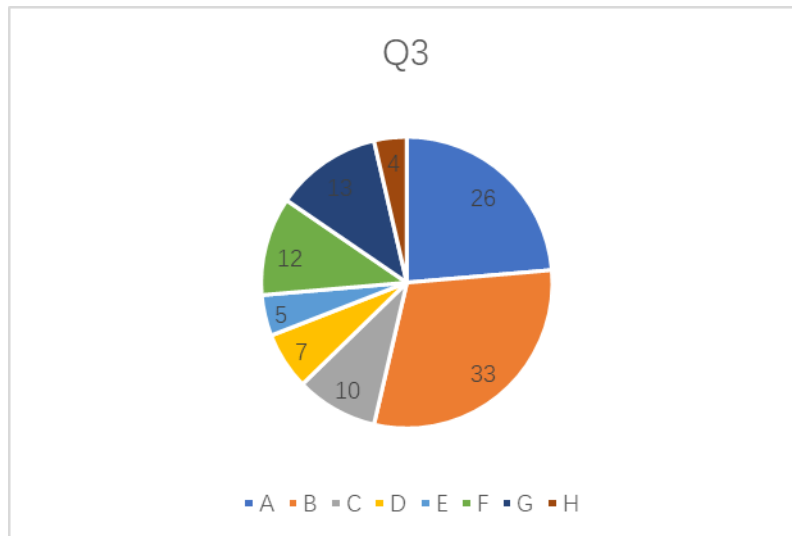
E: I have products with similar uses.

F: I have not seen any related products.

G: I am heterosexual, and I do not think I have a reason to buy them.



H: Other.



**Figure 3. Q3: No Matter Whether You Purchased Rainbow Products before, Why Do You not Want to Buy Them in the Future?**

When people were asked, “Why do you want to buy some rainbow products in the future?”, 41.5 percent of participants paid more attention to the product itself, which means people pay attention to the practical value of products, leading to the same conclusion as question 3.

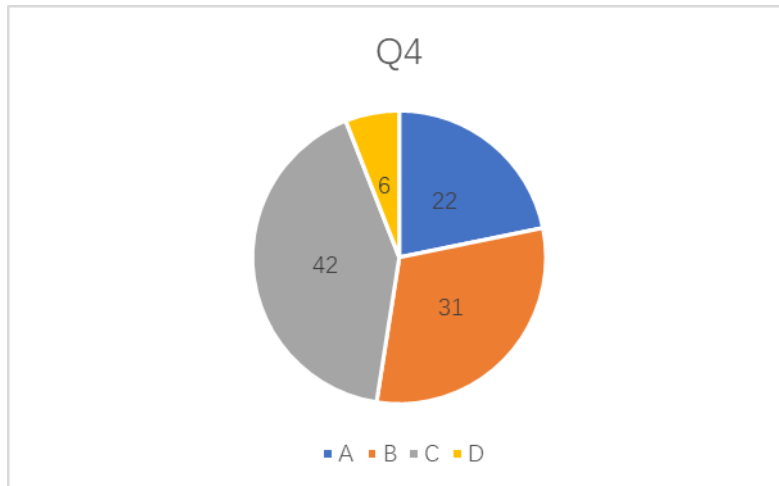
Q4: No matter whether you have purchased rainbow products before, why do you not want to buy them in the future?

A: I belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and I feel it necessary to support them.

B: I am not part of the LGBTQ+ community, but I am willing to support them.

C: I think the impact of the product itself (quality, price, etc.) is greater than the interference of external factors.

D: Other.



**Figure 4. Q4: No Matter Whether You Have Purchased Rainbow Products before, Why Do You not Want to Buy Them in the Future?**

The samples collected from Australia are shown in Table 2. The demographic traits are also shown. As shown, participants were mostly under thirty-four years old, were male, were gay, and were graduates.

**Table 2. Sample (from Australia) Profile**

Age	Number
18-24	12
25-34	5
35-44	1
45-54	1
55-64	2
Over 65	0
Total	21

Gender	Number
Male	19
Female	1
Nonbinary	1
Total	21

Sexual Orientation	Number
Straight	1

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Gay	10
Lesbian	0
Bisexual	7
Transfer	0
Queer	1
Other	2
Total	21

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Education	Number
Primary	0
Secondary	1
Some Secondary	1
Vocational or similar	2
Some university but no degree	4
Bachelor	5
Graduate or professional degree	7
Total	21

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Marriage and Relationship Status	Number
Married	1
Living with a partner	2
Widowed	0
Divorced/separated	1
Never been married	17
Total	21

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Monthly Disposable Income (in AUD)	Number
Not at all	2
A little	9
A moderate amount	4
A lot	5

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A great deal	1
Total	21

Because the samples from Australia were only a few, the author used words to show the results. (1) When participants were asked “Would you choose to purchase the products because they are rainbow products (even if you do not need them)?” only five people said YES, and sixteen people said NO, which means people in Australia are closed-minded, even though the participants were almost all LGBTQ. (2) When participants were asked “Have you purchased rainbow products?” thirteen participants said NO, and eight participants said YES. The answers to this question are quite similar, so the author cannot draw conclusions. (3) When participants were asked “Why you do not want to buy rainbow products in the future?” only nine participants said that because they were LGBTQ, they wanted to support the community, even though most participants were LGBTQ.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, in this study, the author assessed people’s attitudes toward rainbow products in China (mainland) and Australia to gauge the affection of individuals toward rainbow products.

For the H1: With the emergence and development of the power of LGBTQ, people’s attitudes toward rainbow products are more progressive. The results show that even if the LGBTQ activities are more widespread today, people’s attitudes, even LGBTQ individuals themselves, are still conservative.

For the H2: People will tend to buy rainbow products to support LGBTQ. The results show that although there are some people who will buy rainbow products to support LGBTQ, a majority of people pay more attention to the product itself, such as price, quality, practical use, and so on. Although some brands use specific marketing strategies related to LGBTQ, almost half of people dislike such strategies because they think it is a kind of marketing gimmick.

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on the LGBTQ community, an important phenomenon that is often overlooked by researchers.

## 7. Limitations and Suggestions

This study was not immune to limitations. First, the author adopted a quantitative method, but the samples were largely from China and Australia, so I suggested that future researchers could focus on a larger area and discover more outcomes. Second, this is research about attitude, but the author overlooked the in-depth interview method and other qualitative approaches. Thus, I suggest that future researchers could use qualitative methods to supplement their studies.

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