Embracing the Glitter on the Rainbow: Digitalization of LGBTQ Identity and Expression among Younger Consumers

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Abstract
Over the past decade, the explosion of online social and e-commerce platforms has led to a respatialization of the LGBT marketplace, where brick and mortar businesses that served as the focus of identity formation and social action have been replaced by social media groups and online dating platforms. At the same time, and perhaps not coincidentally, LGBTQ consumers are fast approaching a majority in U.S. society, especially among the younger population. However, as societal acceptance of gender as a fluid construct increases, the desire to label gender and sexual identities seems to have grown with a proliferation of new labels and terms. This research looks specifically at the impact of digital respatialization on LGBTQ identity and expression for GenZ and Millennial consumers and considers the implication for advertisers looking to make an impact on this fast-growing market. Specifically, this research provides empirical evidence of societal shifts in LGBTQ identity development and expression. Additionally, it draws upon queer theory, social identity theory, and network theory to examine the impact on LGBTQ identity development and expression of three related societal phenomena occurring over the past two decades: (1) the respatialization of LGBTQ spaces, (2) the digitalization of LGBTQ exploration and formation, and (2) intermediary role of digital identity expression systems. Finally, the paper will examine how advertisers can effectively navigate the complexity of LGBTQ identities among Gen-Z and millennial consumers to create advertising that authentically represents the diversity of members of the LGBTQ consumer market while being an advocate for social change.

Keywords: LGBTQ consumers, LGBTQ Identity Development, Gen Z, Millennials, Digitalization, Social Media, Advertising. Social Advocacy

Over the past decade, U.S. society has shifted into an identity revolution that blurs the borders of sexuality and gender, especially among younger individuals.[1] People are no longer confining themselves to the classification of the bodies they were born with or society's rules for what those bodies can and cannot do. Young Thug, a slim rapper prone to wearing dresses, states that he feels "there's no such thing as gender" in a new commercial for Calvin Klein. The Oxford English Dictionary recently included Mx as a neutral replacement for titles like Mr. and Mrs. The video game "The Sims" has begun allowing players to create same-sex relationships and lifted gender restrictions on characters' clothing and hairstyles. In 2015, 81% of Gen Z members reported that they don't care about other people's sexual orientation, 88% say people are exploring their sexuality more than in the past, and 81% do not think gender defines a person as much as it used to.[2]

LGBTQ consumers are no longer a niche market and are fast approaching a majority in U.S. society, especially among the younger population. 20% of Millennials and a noteworthy 31% of GenZennials (born after 1998) identify as LGBTQ.[3] This growth is primarily driven by the mainstreaming of gender and sexual identity where the vast majority of millennials and centennials believe "some people fall outside of conventional categories."[4] In recent years, there has been a notable shift among younger consumers away from the sexual binary of gay or straight that was embraced when the "Dream Market" was launched as a socio-political effort to gain social legitimacy in the marketplace.[5]

In practice, younger LGBTQ individuals weave together their sexual and gender identities in a manner that cannot be captured by the L, the G, the B, or the T.[6] This movement has led to a multitude of terms that attempt to capture new additions to the term "LGBT" which evolved in the 1900s to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. We are participants in a societal revolution where younger generations have reappropriated " queer" to represent this expanding spectrum of identities. The term "queer" may be used to refer to anyone who does not identify as heterosexual or gender-normative (non-cisgender), instead of exclusively to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.[7] Many older members of the LGBTQ population struggle to embrace the term "queer," given its history as a pejorative term.

As the physical LGBT market and gathering places of previous generations have given way to online spaces, as networked social media have overtaken targeted print media, and as these social media allow for connections and solidarity among small groups of highly geographically dispersed people, there has been an intensification of identity work that blurs the borders of sexuality and gender, especially among younger individuals.[1] For Millennials and GenZ consumers, social media is the most influential form of media they now have. They turn to it for the profound and the mundane — to shape their views and their aesthetics. When they dive into Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and, less frequently, Facebook, they are on exploratory missions without the identity boundaries of the gay bars, bookstores, and coffee houses of previous generations. In these digital spaces, they process large volumes of information that help them shape their understanding of themselves and each other. Social media has broken down barriers that existed around the previously taboo topics of sexuality and gender identity in the process.

While social media has played a pivotal role in the exploration and construction of expansive ideas of gender and sexuality, it's not surprising that technology would play an equally critical role in that most primal of human pursuits – that of romance, love, and sex. Millennials and Gen Z have taken to looking for a partner online like no previous generation. 43% of current online daters are millennials, and, unlike many older users, 40% consider digital dating fun.[8] Research from online dating platform, Zoosk, has shown Gen Z users "swipe" or say "yes" to 33%

of the potential matches they're presented, which is 15% more than millennials and 20% more than Gen Xers and baby boomers.[9] Swiping right has become integral to these generations as Facebook "likes" were to previous ones.

Following this trend, LGBTQ GenZ and Millennials who form their identities online in social media also expect to be given opportunities to express their own gender and sexual identities and select partners based upon their intersecting identities on online dating platforms. Following the overall technology-driven cultural shift from physical LGBTQ spaces to those online, 56% of LGBTQ singles have dated someone they met online, with transgender singles dating the most online (65%).[10] Hence, both social media and online dating are at the forefront of gender and sexual identity exploration, construction, and expression in modern society.

Hence, as societal acceptance of gender as a fluid construct increases, the need to label gender and sexual identities seems to have grown with a proliferation of new labels and terms. While younger generations of LGBTQ consumers transcend the binary conceptions of their predecessors to embrace identity fluidity, GenZennials and Millennials appear to simultaneously embrace a micro-dissection of their queer gender/sexual identities represented as distinct markers or labels in a multi-dimensional space. *Sexuality Marking* serves as a way to assert one's sexuality to others through language, behavior, aesthetics, or other non-verbal cues.[11, 12, 13, 14] These micro identity markings provide specific expressions of their gender and sexual identities to create a "Genderation" gap with older LGBTQ individuals,[4] who see their world as primarily two binary choices on two dimensions - male and female/ straight and gay - and use macro identities markings.

This growing population of non-conforming millennials and centennials are growing up without the stigma and lack of social legitimacy that defined previous generations of LGBT individuals. They are not looking to hide, they do not feel "niche," and they expect to be recognized by both marketers and society. To date, however, it would appear that marketers have not attempted to reach this audience or have been ineffective at doing so as an alarming 66% of LGBTQ individuals said they don't see their lifestyle represented in advertising and 51% say they wish they could see more advertising with families like theirs.[15]

Within this maze of fluid identities and micro-marked expressions of those identities, socially-minded marketers who wish to embrace the LGBTQ consumer market struggle to pinpoint how to represent LGBTQ consumers authentically or identify traditionally defined marketing segments. The imperatives of marketing, which needs to target homogeneous and actionable groups of people based on identifiable characteristics, mean that it can be hard to bring queer insights into marketing practice. Additionally, the gender binary continues to have social meaning for most people – LGBTQ people included – as it structures many economic, social, and political opportunities and can give meaning to personal identities. The challenge for marketing practitioners is to acknowledge and utilize insights from queer theory and social identity theory to improve gender and sexual identity norms for all people while working within the practical constraints of marketing practice.

This research looks specifically at the impact of digital respatialization on LGBTQ identity and expression for GenZ and Millennial consumers and considers the implication for advertisers looking to make an impact on this fast-growing market. Specifically, this research provides empirical evidence of societal shifts in LGBTQ identity development and expression. Additionally, it draws upon queer theory, social identity theory, and network theory to examine the impact on LGBTQ identity development and expression of three related societal phenomena occurring over the past two decades: (1) the respatialization of LGBTQ spaces, (2) the digitalization of LGBTQ exploration and formation, and (2) intermediary role of digital identity

expression systems. Finally, the paper will examine how advertisers can effectively navigate the complexity of LGBTQ identities among Gen-Z and millennial consumers to create advertising that authentically represents the diversity of members of the LGBTQ consumer market while resonating with their lived experiences in society.

Empirical Evidence of Societal Shifts in LGBTQ Identities

Over the past two decades, the marketplace has evidenced a shift in the conceptualization of LGBTQ identities from monosexual to plurisexual sexual identities and fixed binary gender identities to the dynamic fluidity of younger generations' identities.

The Fluidity of Sexual Identity

A 2021 Ipsos study finds fewer younger Americans than older cohorts claim a heterosexual identity where they are only attracted to the opposite sex.[16] Beyond categorizing sexual orientation by the sex of the object, sexual orientation has also been categorized based on the number of sexes to whom one is attracted. The term "Monosexual" applies to people attracted to a single gender and "Plurisexual" applies to people attracted to multiple genders.[17] Over the past two decades, younger generations have increasingly moved towards exploring, claiming, and expressing plurisexual identities over the monosexual identities of their LGBTQ predecessors. A closer look at the 2021 Ipsos study quantifies this noteworthy trend within the growing LGBTQ population. An ever-increasing proportion of the U.S. population rejects the notion of sexual identity operating on any normative binary. 46% of Gen Z and 34% of Millennials express attraction to both sexes or identify as plurisexual, embracing identities of sexual fluidity that create a stark contrast to the 14 - 22% of older generations who do likewise.[16]

The Fluidity of Gender Identity

Queer theory scholars have long suggested that gender is fluid, flexible, and subject to change. Judith Butler's work is key to this understanding. She argues that gender is performative – meaning that the performance of gender is what makes gender exist.[18] Consistent with Butler's conceptualism, Gen Z and Millennials' ideas of gender are far less binary than those of older generations. They expect this gender fluidity to be replicated in the marketplace. Fusion's Massive Millennial Poll survey of 1,000 people aged 18-34 found that young people are moving away from a binary representation of gender, a significant shift from previous generations.[2] Older generations tend to approach both sexual identity and gender identity as binary constructs, rejecting the fluid paradigms of younger generations. According to a 2020 study by the Pew Research Center, 59% of Gen Zers and 50% of Millennials, compared with 40% of Xers, 37% of Baby Boomers, and roughly 32% of the Silent Generation, say forms or online profiles should include options other than "man" and "woman."[19]

In 2016, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), America's leading LGBTQ rights organization, transitioned from LGBT to LGBTQ - after Facebook, OkCupid, and Tinder had embraced identity fluidity. The organization's decision to adopt the term was driven by predominant use by youth who refer to their sexual orientation as "queer" and their gender identity as "genderqueer" while others use personal descriptions of more fluid identities.[20]

Queer is often used as an umbrella term to describe non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals or those outside of traditional gender roles or sexual binaries.[21]

The Proliferation of LGBTQ Identity Markings

Queer not only refers to an identity label but a framework of thought through queer theory. Rather than create socially acceptable forms of non-normative identities, queer theory rejects the idea of assimilation to the norm[22] Barker and Scheele 2016). This theory resists the categorization of individuals and also resists the binary constructs that surround sexuality and gender.[23] In recent years, the term "Queer' has been embraced by younger generations to encompass their mindset of identities that have the commonality of being non-straight or non-CIS gender. This understanding of queer identity creates a broad spectrum of inclusion. However, even if a person fits within that description, it does not necessarily mean they endorse a queer sexual identity label. As an identity label, queer is often seen as a "non-label"; queer is fluid, changing, and hard to define.[23]

While the adoption of "Queer" is an attempt to bundle all identities that are neither heterosexual nor cis-gender with one sweeping, though troubled, term, there has been a proliferation of names used during the past several years to describe variances in sexual orientation and gender identity.[24] In professional literature and public discourse, there has also been a shift towards using these constructs to describe identities rather than behaviors.[25] Many of these labels are newer creations (e.g., pansexual, androgyne, genderqueer), and some are unique to specific cultures (e.g., two-spirit in Native American traditions, fa'afafine in Samoa, hijra in South Asia, especially India). The list of labels for variations in sexual orientation or gender identity is continuously changing and expanding. Sexuality and gender "marking" serves as a way to assert one's sexuality and gender to others through language, behavior, aesthetics, or other non-verbal cues[11, 12, 13, 14]

LGBTQ individuals are often categorized together as having shared experiences surrounding their identities,[26, 27] resulting in within-group differences being left unexplored. Because labels are often used to relate to others, it makes sense that terms and usage may be adjusted to fit the audience and to convey specific aspects of attraction.[27, 28]

Understanding LGBTQ Identity Development

A well-developed identity is the awareness of the consistency in self over time and the recognition of this consistency by others.[29] The process of identity development is both an individual and social phenomenon.[30] Much of this process is assumed during adolescence when cognitive development allows an individual to construct a 'theory of self'[31] based on exposure to role models and identity options. Erikson[29] believed this period of development to be an 'identity crisis,' a crucial turning point in which an individual must develop in one way or another, ushering the adolescent toward growth and differentiation. Identity is formed through a process of exploring options or choices and committing to an option based upon the outcome of their exploration. Identity development is vital to a person's understanding of self and participation in their social systems.

Compared to their heterosexual, cis-gendered peers, LGBTQ individuals face a distinct path along which they must consciously navigate the emergence and disclosure of their identity. Learning through direct questioning, observation, and personal experiences guides this process of identification and socialization.[33, 34, 35] Although the experiences of LGBTQ individuals are unique, one common element is the process of coming out. [33, 34, 35] The "coming out" process among sexual minority individuals has been the subject of much research interest. It has been considered an essential developmental milestone in the U.S.[36] The process involves understanding one's sexual/ gender minority status, developing a social identity that incorporates LGBT status,

and ultimately sharing this identity with others and redefining relationships to integrate this new information.[37]

There are several variations in how theorists perceive the coming out process, but some general similarities. First, during what Troiden[35] labels the sensitization stage, individuals become aware of feeling different and begin to question their heterosexuality or cisgender identity. They begin to seek out information to learn more about what they are feeling. Some may experience a subsequent period of confusion and turmoil during which they may attempt to reject or reframe their identity. During the assumption stage, the process of self-acceptance begins.[35] Individuals start to disclose their identity to others and seek out similarly-identified acquaintances, social ties, and role models to learn how to enact their identity. During the commitment stage, individuals embrace their identity and are ready to disclose more widely to others.[35] During any of these formative stages, it is likely that LGBTQ individuals seek out information and attempt to learn more about their identity. Although some individuals may have access to interpersonal or systemic resources, such as family members, friends, school counselors, or queer-friendly organizations, many individuals independently proceed through these identity stages. As such, they must seek out information and learn about various elements of LGBTQ identity and experiences through other sources, frequently media, to fill these information gaps. [38, 39]

Respatialization and Digitalization of LGBTQ Identity Development and Expression

This research proposes the fluid identity/marked expression paradigm embraced by many younger LGBTQ consumers is the outcome of three related societal phenomena occurring over the past two decades: (1) the respatialization of LGBTQ Communities, (2) the digitalization of LGBTQ exploration and formation, and (3) intermediary role of digital identity expression systems.

Respatialization of LGBTQ Communities

Traditionally, gay neighborhoods have been physical spaces that have enabled sexual minorities to explore their identity and express themselves freely in a (relatively) safe space. LGBTQ neighborhoods orient both individual and collective LGBTQ identity, enclaves where individuals who share the common experience of sexual marginalization form an authentic community that is home to "residences, businesses, real estate, bars, restaurants, movie theaters, cultural centers, community-based associations, street gathering and celebrations" which create a sense of "social life and cultural autonomy."[40] For individuals, LGBTQ neighborhoods have traditionally been places of comfort and refuge for LGBTQ people seeking those who are like themselves. For a young LGBTQ person who has recently acknowledged themself as a sexual minority, an LGBTQ neighborhood is a place to find out how to dress, how to date, how to "be" gay, and shed his or her sense of isolation. On a more collective level, LGBTQ neighborhoods enable the possibility of political action through visibility and advocacy. Visibility happens in different ways -- through the claiming of spaces such as storefronts, sidewalks, and public parks as LGBTQ and the performance of LGBTQ identity in these places.[41]

Traditional LGBTQ neighborhoods may be thought of as spaces where marginalized people come together in set geographic enclaves to live, shop, and socialize, providing a home for LGBTQ-owned and operated businesses, community organizations, and LGBTQ media. However, at present, LGBTQ neighborhoods are in a state of transition where many are losing their distinct identity as LGBTQ-specific enclaves. Between the 2000 and 2010 Census, the number of same-sex couples living in key traditional gayborhoods declined, often as more prominent trends in

urban life made those neighborhoods newly desirable destinations.[42] Simultaneously, the 2014 Census recorded same-sex romantic couples living together in 93 percent of America's counties. The LGBTQ population became less concentrated as its legal, political, and social reality is increasingly accepted.

Demographer Gary Gates[43] argues that the shift is due to the increasing tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQ people at large. They do not need the gay neighborhood for support and safety anymore because of the higher level of support and safety that now exists outside of these bubbles.[43, 44, 45] LGBTQ people no longer need an enclave.[46, 43, 44] It no longer takes a specific geographic destination for one to feel safe being out, and that being out in public life is no longer restricted to the former traditional spots of New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, or a half-dozen other major metropolises. Additionally, 21 and over gay bars no longer keep pace with the "Coming out" timeline of LGBTQ people. LGBTQ people are coming out earlier, while still in school, often before they can drive or legally drink, so they have no use for the gay bars that were the center of LGBTQ communities. To a large extent, the mainstreaming of gay culture has meant that LGBTQ individuals coming out today have less need for specifically LGBTQ spaces than do generations prior.

Online social and e-commerce platforms have led to a respatialization of the gay marketplace, where a digital LGBTQ ecosystem usurped brick and mortar businesses that served as existing spatial frameworks for social actions.[6] Gay bookstores struggle to survive as LGBTQ titles are now widely available on Amazon. As social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow LGBTQ individuals to access various networks, information, and products that may or may not be LGBTQ-specific, gay print media readerships have plummeted, and many titles have folded.

Gay bars no longer serve a central purpose for social activity, as gay-specific sites such as Grindr, HER, and Chappy, and mainstream sites such as OKCupid, Tinder, and Match, serve the needs of LGBTQ consumers. Networked LGBTQ consumers communicating online have forged new forms of connectivity and connection in an online world full of new social interaction. Geographic space, then, is no longer necessary social activity for previous generations.[47]

Digitalization of LGBTQ Identity Exploration and Formation

Over 90% of adults in the United States have at least one social media account, and LGBTQ people are more socially active on social media than heterosexuals.[48] Social media includes various websites and mobile apps that enable users to create content and participate in online social networking (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter).[49] Social media use encompasses a series of measures that capture the experience of using social media. According to the Pew Research Center data in 2019, there are substantial differences in social media usage by age. 90% of people aged 18 to 29 indicate that they use some form of social media.[49] That usage falls to 82% among those ages 30 to 49, 69% among those ages 50 to 64, and 40% among Americans 65 and older.

For LGBTQ individuals, social media is a primary mode of socializing, and LGBTQ persons are more socially active on social media than heterosexuals.[50, 51] National data on LGBTQ individuals found that over 85% of participants had one social media account, and they used it at least weekly; this usage rose to over 91% among LGBTQ young adults.[52] While social media plays an essential role as a testing ground for expression, the locus of experimentation and exploration plays a particularly crucial function for those who cannot yet fully inhabit their identities offline for fear of discrimination or physical harm. It has become a lifeline for many struggling to find others just like them. Social media provides users a protective veil that does not always exist in

the real world for the LGBTQ population, and that did not exist for older generations. Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have given younger LGBTQ users the power to show others exactly how they want to portray themselves without the threat of physical harm. A 2014 study on social media and gender identity concluded that members of the LGBTQ community "created new, non-heterosexual spaces where identity is not determined by an individual's past" on the Internet.[53] For some users, this may be an escape from reality, and it may be the only platform they have to be themselves.

The Exploratory Power of the Digital Ecosystem

Existing research has identified the role that various media play for LGBTQ individuals in this process and suggests that media figures play an essential role in their identity development.[54, 39] This research has also associated exposure to positive LGBTQ representations with resilience and well-being.[55, 56] One issue is that LGBTQ representations are relatively uncommon in mainstream media.[57] Even though they have become more frequent in recent years, the scope of portrayals is still limited; for example, gay men are featured far more frequently than other groups while other identities remain nearly invisible.[58, 59] Further, these depictions are often stereotyped or otherwise censored [60, 61] and provide limited learning opportunities. Given the limitations of traditional media, one common source for such information in the modern era is social media. Even in the early years of internet accessibility, researchers investigated how marginalized people such as LGBTQ-identified individuals benefit from online information seeking and interactions.[62, 63] Social media has numerous functions for LGBTQ individuals, including expressing, constructing, and managing identity.[64, 65, 66, 67] and facilitating the coming out process.[68, 69, 65] Social media has broken down barriers that existed around the previously taboo topics of sexuality and gender identity. The ubiquity of social media platforms has allowed younger members of the LGBTQ population to explore and express their identities in a manner unavailable to previous generations. It is a platform for communication among highly geographically dispersed people, allowing individuals to gather and express themselves and their identities in more proliferous digital affinity and identity-based groups than would be impossible in the physical coming-out environments of previous generations.

Hence, while older generations engaged in the coming-out identity exploration process in physical spaces such as gay bars, bookstores, coffee houses, and community houses, for Millennials and Gen Z consumers, social media is the most influential space they inhabit. When they dive into Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and, less frequently, Facebook, they are on exploratory missions, processing large volumes of information that helps them shape their understanding of themselves and each other. Thus, while older generations navigated the coming out process in physical spaces that either reinforced the binary or separated the sexes - Lesbian and Gay community center, Gay and Lesbian church, gay bar, lesbian bar, gay coffeehouse, lesbian coffeehouse, gay coming- out support group, lesbian coming-out support group - younger generations have no such barriers, either physical, psychological, or digital to identity exploration during the coming out process.

Following the overall technology-driven cultural shift from physical LGBTQ spaces to those online, a 2020 Pew Research survey found that meeting online has become the most popular way for U.S. couples to connect — especially for gay couples.[70]

FIGURE 1: LGBTQ Adults Use of Online Dating' Compared to Straight Adults

% of U.S. adults saying they have ever used an online dating site or app

Straight — 28

Lesbian, gay or bisexual — 55

0 ··· 100

% of partnered adults saying they met their current partner online

11 ··· 28

0 ··· 100

% of single adults looking for a relationship or dates saying they are currently using an online dating site or app

24 ··· 37

0 ··· 100

Note: Partnered adults refers to those who are married, living with a partner or in a committed relationship. Single adults refers to those who are not in a committed relationship. The shares saying they met their current partner online include those who met on dating sites or apps, social media sites or apps, online games and other online spaces.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 16-28, 2019.

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As shown in Figure 1, the survey finds that most LGBTQ adults (55%) report that they have used an online dating site or app at some point, roughly twice the share of straight adults (28%) who say the same.[70] Transgender singles are most likely to participate (65%)[9] Match 2017). Among LGBTQ adults who are married, living with a partner, or in a committed relationship, 28% say they met their current partner online, compared with 11% of partnered straight adults. Finally, among LGBTQ people who are now single and looking for a relationship or dates, 37% are currently online dating (vs. 24% of straight people who are single and looking).[70]

One of the advantages of online dating is that it can help people with a small pool of potential partners – such as those seeking same-sex partners – to find a match.[71] Additionally, online dating enables LGBTQ people to quietly find dating prospects in areas where being open about their orientation or gender identity is extremely dangerous (or even against the law).

Interestingly, just as with Facebook in social media, the most significant adaption to the explosion of gender identity and non-binary sexuality in modern society has come from outside of the online dating apps developed specifically for the LGBTQ community. As Facebook led the way on gender identity among social media platforms, mainstream companies OkCupid and Tinder have pushed social progress on gender identity across all sexual orientations and gender identities in a dating context. Both apps use proprietary algorithms to match users. They tend to be more

popular among Gen Z and millennials than Generation Xers and baby boomers, who were both more likely to use a paid subscription-based dating website or app.[72]

Intermediary Role of Digital Identity Expression Systems

Defying Sender's[1] warning that reliance on algorithms would lead to the commodification of identity, as physical LGBT marketplaces have given way to online spaces, as networked social media have overtaken targeted print media, and as these social media allow for connections and solidarity among small groups of highly geographically dispersed people, we are seeing an intensification of identity work that blurs the borders of sexuality and gender, especially among younger individuals.[1] However, despite the fluidity of identities, a countervailing social force mandates the adoption of labels as signifiers of sexual and gender identity to others - the ubiquitous online profile.

Both social media and online dating are at the forefront of gender and sexual identity construction, communication, and expression in modern society. As Foucault[25] described it, "The nineteenth century and our own have been rather the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms…our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities" (p. 37). In the present day, as individuals connect and engage in dialogues, neologisms are formed that quickly begin to appear in public and academic discourse. The proliferation of labels to define increasingly specific sexual and gender identity markings is almost exclusively generated by individuals naming themselves or joining together in groups within the digital ecosystem, making the process distinctly different from the medical diagnoses and scientific classifications of the nineteenth century.

The Marking Power of the Digital Profile

As Gen Z and millennials use social media to experiment and construct intricate LGBTQ identities, they also look to technology to reflect the identity markings and neologisms created within its own digital ecosystem. For its first ten years, Facebook limited its billions of users to identify as either male or female. In 2014, the ubiquitous social network, which is somewhat of a social census, responded to the demands of younger users to reconstitute gender categories beyond the oppressive binary. In response to intense pressure from its Millennial and Gen Z users, the ubiquitous social network, which is somewhat of a social census, responded to the demands of younger users to reconstitute gender categories beyond the oppressive binary. In 2014, Facebook allowed users to select a custom gender identity beyond the dichotomous labels "male" and "female," and offered a list of 58 gender options (from which the user could select up to 10). Those were:

> *Agender, Androgyne, Androgynous, Bigender, Cis, Cis Female, Cis Male, Cis Man, Cis Woman,, Cisgender Female, Cisgender Male, Cisgender Man, Cisgender Woman, Female, Female to Male, FTM, Gender Fluid, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Questioning, Gender Variant, Genderqueer, Intersex, Male, Male to Female, MTF, Neither, Neutrois, Non-binary, Other, Pangender, Trans, Trans Female, Trans Male, Trans Man, Trans Person, Trans Woman, Trans*, Trans* Female, Trans* Male, Trans* Man, Trans* Person, Trans* Woman, Transfeminine, Transgender, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Transgender Man, Transgender Person, Transgender Woman, Transmasculine, Transsexual, Transsexual Female, Transsexual Male, Transsexual Man, Transsexual Person, Transsexual Woman, Two-spirit.*

The following year, Facebook announced that it had modified the custom gender option after receiving feedback that some individuals found it difficult to express their sex with the pre-populated list of 58 options.[73] It now offers a free-form field where users can enter any term they want to describe their gender identity and are still able to include up to 10 labels.

This intermediary role provides social media platforms with a considerable degree of control over the generation of broader identity categorization systems. Users of social media platforms typically indicate gender on sign-up pages and profile pages through a range of indicators from custom gender options.[74] In practice, the decision over which gender identity label and which sexual identity label to select during the LGBTQ identity formation process for younger generations has now become baked-in to gender and sexual orientation/identity selections offered in the drop-down menu of every online profile.

Swiping right on a dating app has become integral to younger generations as Facebook "likes" were to previous ones. These users expect opportunities to communicate their gender and sexual identities and select partners based upon a diverse and comprehensive array of preferences on online dating platforms, including mainstream offerings such as OkCupid, Tinder, Bumble, and Match. Indications of sexual orientation and gender identity (with some relatively rare exceptions) play a significant role in the rapidly expanding dating apps industry. They now tend to be included as profile and preference settings in dating apps, making finding potential partners easier and safer. A user's profile is the first thing singles will see on an online dating site. Most users only take a few seconds reviewing each profile to determine if someone is right for them or not. That puts pressure on users to create a profile that offers a perfect representation of themselves, especially among first-time users. Many online daters enlist their friends to help create their best digital footprint. 22% of online daters report that they have asked someone to help them create or improve their profile.[75]

Hence, while one might predict that the increased fluidity in identity-based markets would precipitate a decline in the language of identity among gender and sexually non-normative people with deference to the use of "Queer," the reverse appears to be true. Given the importance of user profiles in the online dating world, users are eager to communicate their individual mix of sexual and gender identities accurately. This has led to an explosion in the usage of distinct categories and accompanying micro-labels to tag the intersection of specific gender and sexual identities, rather than a fluid spectrum. Given the blurring of online and offline worlds in which society now exists, younger generations adopt these labels for identity marking in the real world. [10, 11]

Since late 2014, OkCupid users could choose from 22 potential choices for gender identity and an additional 20 for sexual orientation, including "asexual, bisexual, demisexual, gay, homoflexible, heteroflexible, lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning, sapiosexual, straight." OkCupid users could splice their gender/sexual identity among 440 potential combinations and require the same level of specificity for their matches. It is difficult to see how a gay or lesbian bar could meet the specific social and identity needs of such a spectrum of LGBTQ individuals as effectively as OkCupid's identity options.

In 2017, Tinder expanded the dating pool with the launch of its "More Genders" feature that provided users 37 "More" auto-fill terms for gender on the app. After 12 months of availability, the app announced that "More Genders" had made 25 million matches worldwide.[76]

Challenges for Authentic Representation in Advertising

This shifting landscape of identities and labels creates challenges for effective marketing communication.[77]Attempts to be inclusive can lead to cumbersome lists,[78] and attempts to be efficient can lead to reductionist language, which leaves some individuals feeling misunderstood, excluded, marginalized, or invisible.[77] Individuals in the process of exploring or attempting to understand sexual and gender diversity—in one's self or others—may feel caught in the crossfire. [79] Dacumos[80] cautions, however, that this rejection of traditional labels and push for new terminology by younger generations leads to "a type of super-consumer custom-made identity that leaves you with very little upon which to build a movement" (p. 36) - or a marketplace!

Queer scholars would caution against identity-based marketing in an era of identity proliferation.[81] To be recognized, a consumer has to assume a recognizable identity. For most people, especially those over 35, this means self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, but this can be an essentializing identity category that restricts freedoms. Conversely, consumers who do not define themselves in relation to a gender or sexual identity binary may find their identities erased, misrepresented, and misunderstood in the marketplace.[82] Individuals who fall outside the traditional categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex can thus be invalidated. Those who identify with these categories often have to fit themselves into stereotypical ideas of what LGBTQ means to be socially and politically recognized.

Focus on Social Advocacy Over Identities

Given all of the phenomena involved in representing identities within the LGBTQ population, the most successful approach to advertising to LGBTQ consumers may be to avoid trying to capture the micro identities that exist within the LGBTQ marketplace. Procter & Gamble (P&G) has successfully created advertising that captures the human truths that impact all LGBTQ people, regardless of their specific identity within that population, and the work for social change in broader society on their behalf. Over the past two years, P&G has released groundbreaking advertising that provides mainstream audiences with perspective-taking on the societal struggles of LGBTQ identity as an activation of its mission to be a *Force for Growth and a Force for Good*. Recognizing the power of advertising to shape cultural norms and attitudes and mitigate bias, the company has committed to increasing the visibility and accurate representation of historically underrepresented consumers in its advertising and digital media. *The Pause* speaks to, and about, all LGBTQ people who understand the struggle that exists every day to be their authentic selves in a heteronormative society. *Home for the Holidays* captures the "code-switching" that so many people, especially LGBTQ people, do when returning home for family occasions.

Focusing more specifically on gender fluidity, P&G's Gillette brand is taking steps to be more inclusive with how gender is represented in its marketing. After facing both backlash and acclaim in 2019 over its toxic masculinity ad, Gillette tackled gender again that year. Gillette committed to embrace and promote inclusive representations of gender in #MyBestSelf campaign. To demonstrate that 'The Best a Man Can Get" includes all men, Gillette released a short film titled 'First Shave' which stars Samson, a real transgender teen, who is being taught how to shave for the first time by his father. This month, Gillette launched a social media campaign that took an unprecedented step in a shaving category defined by gender norms. It dropped the word "man" from its slogan altogether and switched to 'The Best YOU Can Get." Working on the human insight that 60% of LGBTQ people change their hair when they come out, P&G's Pantene brand linked this to gender identity in creating the *#beautifulLGBTQ* campaign in the U.S, *Hair has no Gender* in Europe and Canada *This Hair is Me* in Japan

FIGURE 2: Pantene's #BeautifulLBTQ+ Ad Campaign
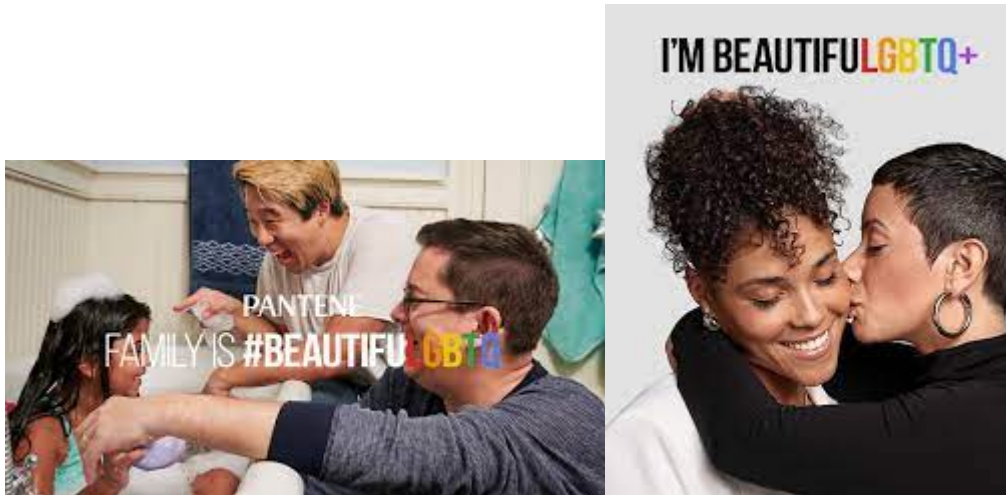
In 2020, Citibank and Mastercard recognized that for transgender and non-binary people who continue to face injustice and prejudice, shopping can be an ordeal: most banks demand a customer uses their birth name. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, almost 70% of trans people don't have even one identity document that reflects the name they use in their daily lives, and only about 20% have been able to update all their legal documents due to a complicated and prohibitively expensive process.[83] The results from NCTE's survey also indicates that when someone's name and gender is incongruent with their identity documents, they are more likely to experience violence and harassment or be denied service.[83] City partnered with Mastercard for the "True Name' initiative that offered transgender and non-binary people the ability to use their chosen name on eligible credit cards. The move from Citi helped trans and non-binary people better navigate the world as themselves.

FIGURE 3: Citi Promote Its Participation in Mastercard's True Name Initiative
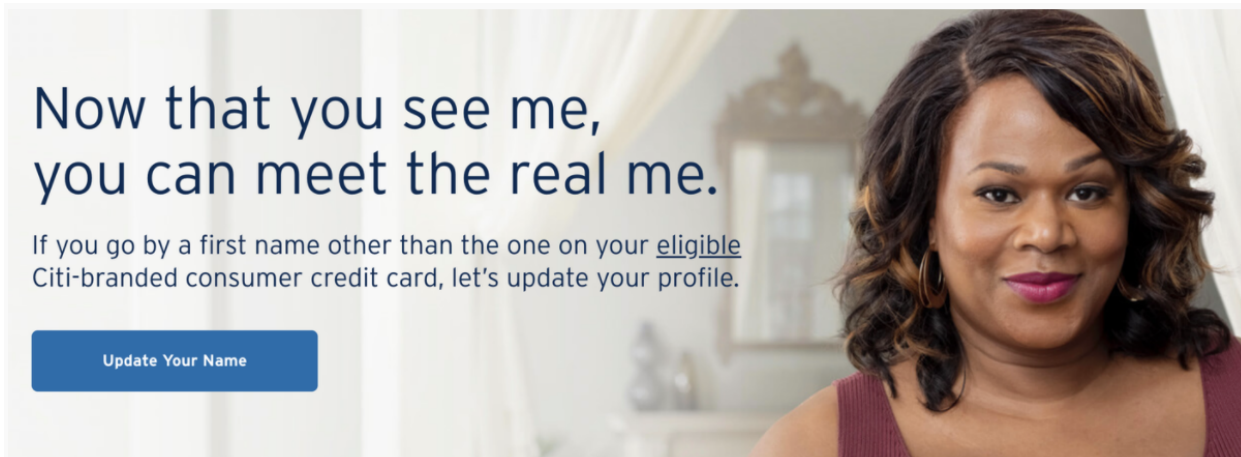
 Citi also released a national broadcast spot in which a young Black trans man and his girlfriend are in the process of finding a name that best represents him.

Absolut has been supporting the LGBTQ community since 1981, when, even as a relatively unknown brand, they ran advertisements in LGBTQ magazines. Since then, their consistent support over the years has seen them create numerous LGBTQ based ads, including the first-ever

rainbow-coloured spirits bottle, amongst various other activations. In 2018, the brand wrapped two London buses in a rainbow print and allowed passengers to donate to Stonewall by tapping their smartphones on the back of the seats.

FIGURE 4: Absolut's Rainbow-colored Bottle

Under Armour's 2020 Pride Collection pays homage to the original Pride flag – dyed on the roof of a local community center in San Francisco in 1978, by a group of LGBTQ volunteers. UA's Pride Collection brings the DIY look of the original Pride flag to life through footwear, apparel, and accessories. UA's LGBTQ Employee Resource Group, Unified, was involved with the design from the beginning of the process and had a heavy influence on the marketing campaign. In addition to the apparel, Under Armour created the UA Pride Grant Program, which seeks to alleviate financial hardships for the LGBTQ community from COVID-19.

FIGURE 5: Under Armor's UA Pride Series

Todays, non-conforming millennials and GenZ consumers are growing up without the stigma and lack of social legitimacy that defined previous generations of LGBT individuals. They are not looking to hide, and they expect to be recognized. Just as with other customers, they expect advertising to be informed by empathy, to provide visibility and accurate representation and to take a stand.

FIGURE 6: Maltesers "Look on the Light Side" Campaign Highlights Gender Inequality

Maltesers, the chocolate giant owned by Mars released a television advertising campaign in the UK aiming to tackle the inequality of gender representation and intersectionality in advertising. Maltesers partnered with Stonewall to create a commercial that places LGBTQ identity within intersectional identities for many Gen Z consumers. The commercial shows a group of friends chatting about dating, with a main character who happens to be a lesbian. According to Michele Oliver, the vice-president of marketing for Mars UK said she hopes people will see from the advertising campaign that "we've got more in common than we have different. Whatever our backgrounds, we're all struggling with the same things, whether that's balancing work and home life, dating or getting older."[84]

In 2020, P&G captured the resilience of the LGBTQ population by partnering with iHeartradio to host the star-studded *Can't Cancel Pride* virtual LGBTQ Pride dance party.

FIGURE 7: Procter And Gamble 2020 *Can't Cancel Pride Event*

It was designed to counteract the damaging effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fund-raising efforts that LGBTQ organizations rely on to survive. The pandemic had also closed LGBTQ community centers, prevented LGBTQ support groups from meeting in person, and

harmed many industries in which many LGBTQ people make their living. Can't Cancel Pride also captured the resiliency of LGBTQ community in refusing to allow the COVID-19 pandemic to interrupt the celebration of LGBTQ identities and experiences. The livestream event on June 25th attracted over 4 million views with talent from Laverne Cox, to Neil Patrick Harris, to Katy Perry, and more. Overall, the campaign generated over one billion media impressions and nearly 40 million views of the advertising, significantly raising LGBTQ visibility during Pride month.

To be LGBTQ is to embrace diversity and to face adversity with resilience. To represent this authentically, marketers will need to commit to doing the work involved in understanding the complexity of fluid but marked identities within the new LGBTQ marketplace. To truly represent and resonate with these consumers, advertisers have to crawl, walk, or dance in the shoes of all LGBTQ consumers. They have to understand the importance of their diverse identities, understand the identity intersectionalities that defy traditional approaches to market segmentation, and capture what binds them together at a human level.

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