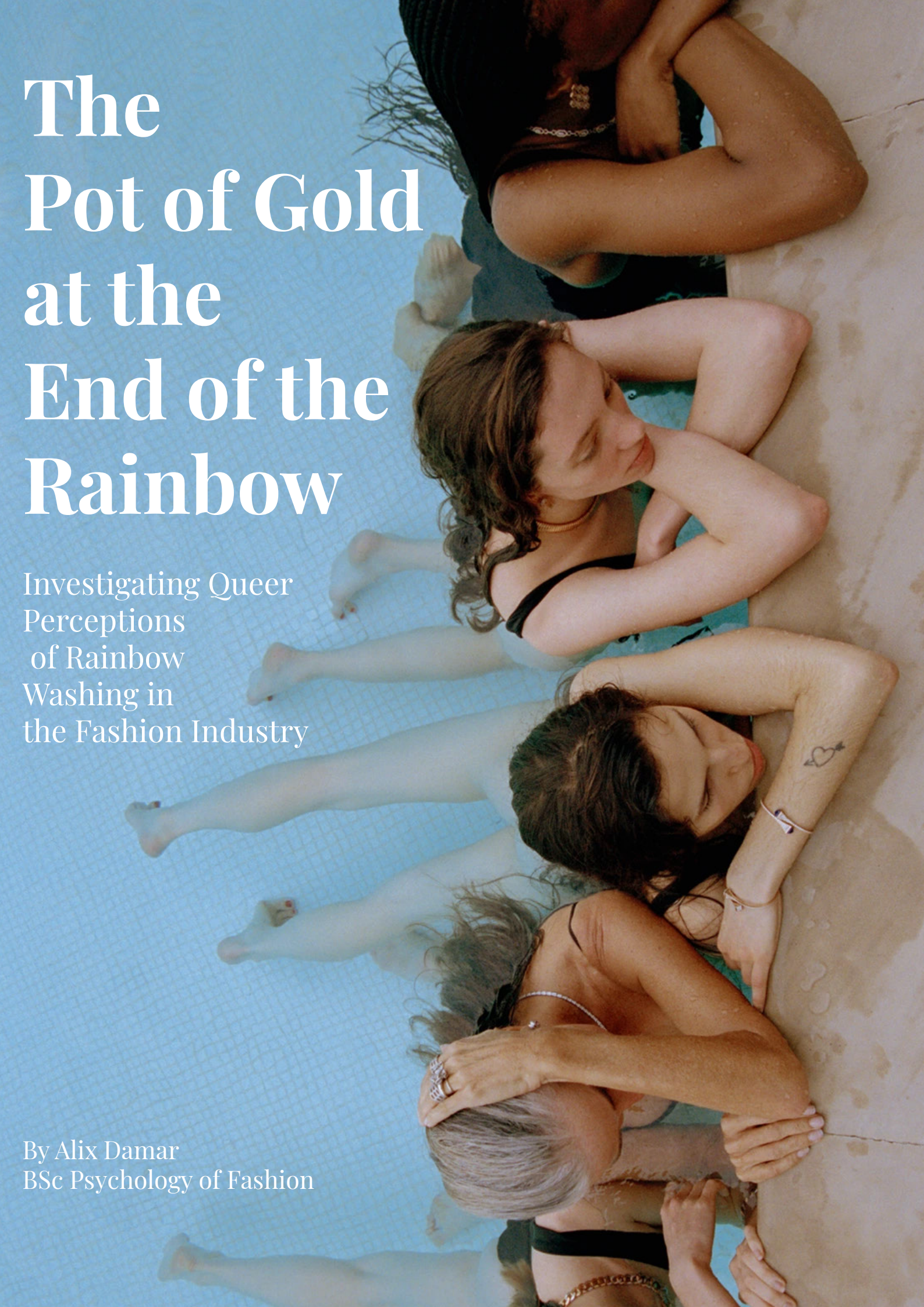


# The Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow

Investigating Queer  
Perceptions  
of Rainbow  
Washing in  
the Fashion Industry

By Alix Damar  
BSc Psychology of Fashion



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Cover photo by Emmie America

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Photograph by Emmie America

# Introduction

Every June, Gay Pride is celebrated around the world. Rainbow flags fly high, brands launch limited-edition Pride collections, and social media becomes a display of LGBTQ+ affirmations. But behind the sparkle and spectacle, some are beginning to question how much of this is genuine support, and how much is just good marketing?



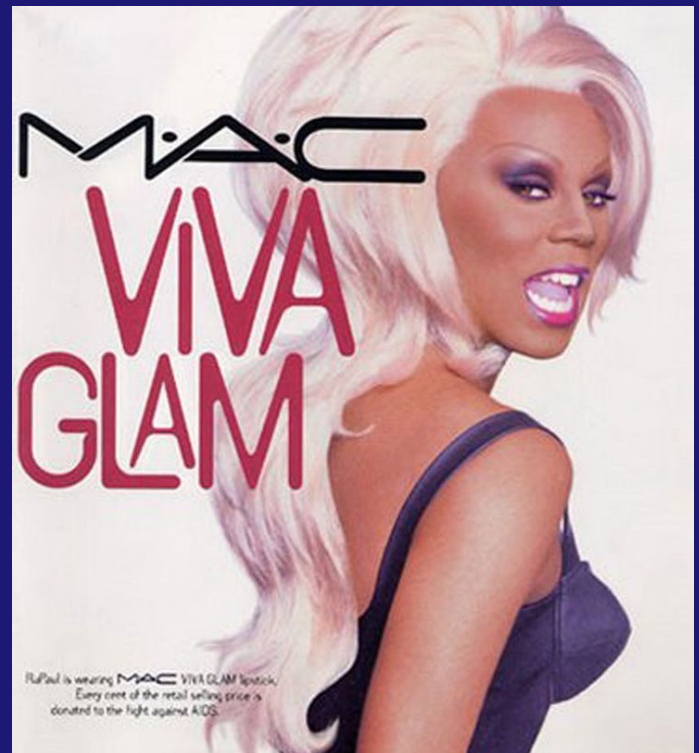
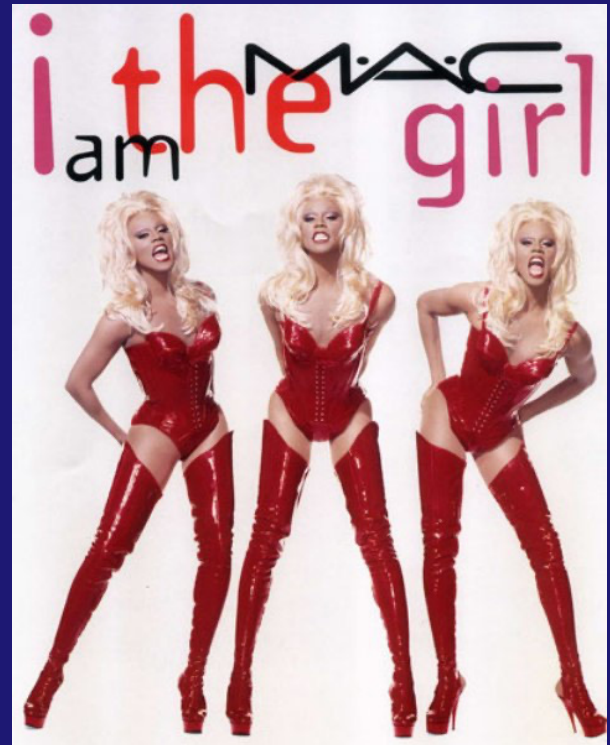
It wasn't always like this. Pride Month was formally recognised by President Obama in 2009,<sup>1</sup> rooted in the resistance of the 1969 Stonewall Uprising. This was an event that marked the beginning of the modern queer rights movement. Fast forward to 2014, and the UK celebrated its first legal same-sex marriages,<sup>2</sup> followed by the US a year later.<sup>3</sup> The joy was widespread with over 26 million Facebook users changing their profile pictures to the rainbow flag to show solidarity.<sup>4</sup>



With rising acceptance came rising influence. The LGBTQ+ community became not only more visible but also more powerful in terms of cultural and economic sway.<sup>5</sup> Brands began to take notice and started marketing to queer consumers, either genuinely or not. In recent years, a trend known as rainbow washing has surfaced. This is when companies use LGBTQ+ symbols or messaging in their campaigns, especially during Pride Month, without meaningful, long-term support or internal action.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, not all brands are guilty of this. Some have shown genuine commitment such as MAC and Levi's. MAC's iconic VIVA GLAM lipstick has donated 100% of its proceeds to LGBTQ+ and AIDS organisations since 1994.<sup>7</sup> Levi's has consistently supported the community through Pride collections, educational initiatives, and backing the first AIDS clinic in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> On the flip side, brands like H&M have been accused of performative allyship, especially when sourcing Pride merchandise from countries with anti-LGBTQ+ laws and failing to be transparent about where donations go.<sup>9</sup>

This wave of rainbow branding clashes sharply with current the political climate. In the US, President Trump's administration (2025–present) has rolled back diversity and inclusion programs, even declaring there are only two genders.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, leaders like Italy's Giorgia Meloni have stripped same-sex parental rights and banned surrogacy for LGBTQ+ citizens.<sup>11</sup> In 2021 Hungary passed a law which bans any media or education content that portrays "diverse gender identities or sexual orientations".<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, fewer companies publicly supported Pride in 2022 compared to the year before,<sup>13</sup> reflecting a shift in corporate attitudes amidst rising political tension. This is even more relevant now in June 2025, as at the time of writing, many companies have decided not to change their logos or come out with Pride collections this year.



Ru Paul for MAC's VIVA LA GLAM lipstick 1995



Equality Protest, Washington DC, USA, 2019



Pride Protest, Rome, Italy, 2022

Despite LGBTQ+ issues becoming central in global discourse, there's still little research on the psychological and cultural effects of rainbow washing on the LGBTQ+ community. While past studies have critiqued corporate Pride campaigns, few have focused specifically on fashion brands, and even fewer have sought insight directly from queer consumers.

Fashion has always played a vital role in queer identity and resistance. From coded dress in underground scenes to the expressive power of style during the AIDS crisis,<sup>14</sup> clothing has served as a form of visibility and self-definition. Yet today, the fashion industry's relationship with LGBTQ+ consumers often seems more about aesthetics and profit than advocacy.



Heaven, London, 1985, Dave Swindells

This feature is based on our research exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive rainbow washing in the fashion industry. Through in-depth interviews with 14 participants, topics such as clothing, identity, marketing, and Pride were explored. The findings reveal how queerness, consumer culture, and fashion intersect in both empowering and problematic ways.

What follows is a deep dive into this research, unpacking the data, drawing connections to existing literature, and questioning what it really means to be an ally in a world of rainbow capitalism.



# What Previous Research Has Found So Far

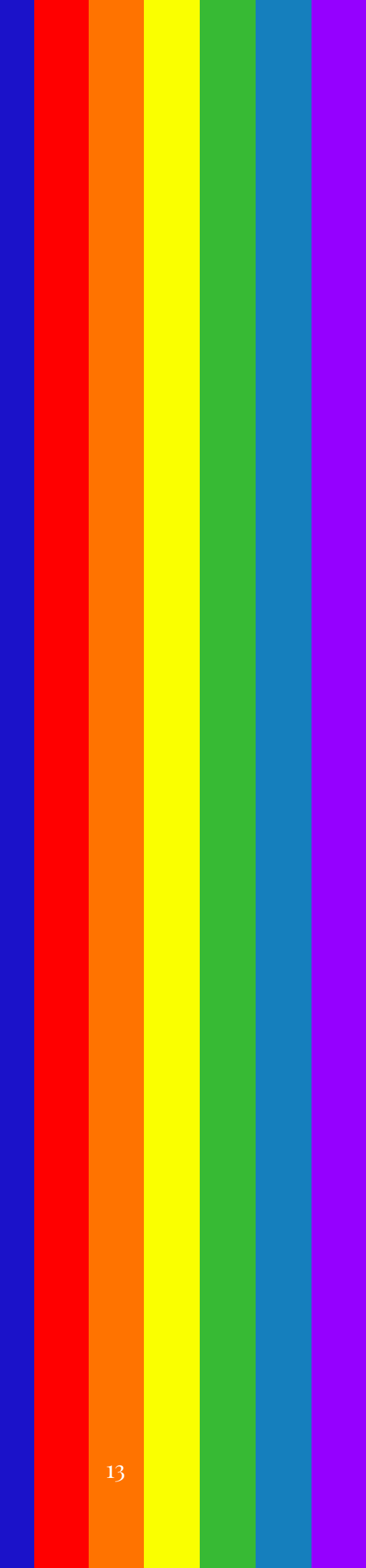


# How Psychology Explains What We Wear

According to *Social Identity Theory*, people often see themselves not just as individuals but as members of social groups, which shapes both how they view themselves and how they interact with others.<sup>20</sup> That's why social movements like Pride are so powerful. They help create shared codes and collective identities.<sup>21,22</sup> And yes, fashion plays a key role. In fact, long before mainstream acceptance, queer people used subtle signals, like a certain clothing pieces or gestures to find one another.<sup>23,24,25,26</sup>

But fashion's meanings aren't always clear-cut. Research shows that clothing can signal group belonging, but it's not always a straightforward reflection of identity. Personal style is shaped by practicalities (like availability or budget), brand image, and personality—not just who you are but also what you want to project.<sup>27</sup>

*Social Cognitive Theory* can also be discussed in relation to fashion's connection with identity. This theory digs deeper into how outside influences, like media and advertising, shape individual identity. Bandura's theory<sup>28</sup> explains that people develop their sense of self partly by observing others, and especially through symbolic modeling.<sup>29</sup> Media representations can strongly shape people's behaviour and self-beliefs, especially when they're repeated over time.<sup>30</sup> Whether this is intentional or not, how you interpret it depends on your beliefs about the media's power to shape dominant narratives. But in this case, think of the rainbow flag: one glance can evoke feelings of solidarity, protest, or pride, depending on who's looking.<sup>31</sup>



But brands have learned how to wield symbols, like the rainbow Pride flag for their own gain. That's where *virtue signalling* comes in. This is a term for when companies try to look good without actually doing good. It's about optics over substance, using social causes as marketing tools rather than moral commitments.<sup>32</sup> Philosopher Justin Tosi calls this “moral grandstanding” and argues it clutters real dialogue and prevents meaningful change.<sup>33</sup>

This often shows up as *tokenism*. That's when companies include LGBTQ+ models or slogans in campaigns for the sake of appearances, not representation.<sup>34</sup> These surface-level gestures rarely engage with the real lives or struggles of queer people.<sup>35</sup> Rosabeth Kanter's research on women in male-dominated workplaces revealed that tokenised individuals often face more pressure and isolation, not less.<sup>36</sup> So putting a rainbow on a product might make a brand look inclusive, but it can have the opposite effect on those it claims to support. Interestingly, other research revealed male “tokens” didn't always experience this marginalisation. In some cases, they were even rewarded, showing how identity politics play out differently depending on who's involved.<sup>37</sup>

# *The 'Gay Best Friend'*

The Gay Best Friend (GBF) is a common trope in media. This is reductive to queer characters, often portraying them as the support to a heterosexual lead.



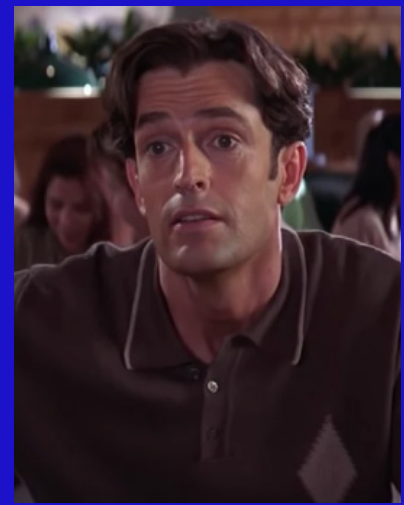
Nigel from *Devil Wears Prada*:

Nigel is Andy's co-worker who helps her with her outfit choices and gives her life advice, but has little story line beyond that.



Damien from *Mean Girls*:

He is a queer character who makes witty little comments but doesn't say or do much else.



George from *My Best Friends Wedding*:

George is Julianne's friend who offers support to her and often acted as comedic relief. Like in many romantic comedies of the 90's, he was an extra to the female lead, rather than a character with his own story.

# *Are companies actually invested in the causes they promote, or just chasing clout?*

Tokenistic marketing gestures point to a broader issue: are companies actually invested in the causes they promote, or just chasing clout? **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** is a concept which has gained traction in almost all businesses challenging this very question.

CSR is a business's commitment to not only drive profits but also improve society, either through community programs, sustainability, or ethical labour practices.<sup>38</sup> But critics argue it often focuses more on how brands appear than on transforming their actual values.<sup>39</sup> Essentially: is it real change, or just good PR?

There's also the question of CSR fit. This is how well a company's activism aligns with its brand identity.<sup>40</sup> When the fit feels right, for example, a makeup brand supporting racial inclusivity through a range of foundation shades, it comes across as authentic.

When it doesn't, audiences are more likely to roll their eyes. Like when H&M came out with a conscious range even though they are one of the biggest fast fashion brands on the planet.

Brand activism, according to researcher Vredenburg, is a growing marketing strategy where companies take bold stances on social or political issues.<sup>41</sup> If done authentically, it can enhance brand loyalty and drive social progress. But if it's inauthentic, it can backfire—damaging trust and doing little for the communities it claims to support. Much of previous research focuses on what works for brands, but less attention is paid to what it feels like for consumers, especially those within marginalised communities.



H&M's Conscious range

# *When Support Becomes a Sales Strategy*

One of the clearest examples of performative CSR is *rainbow washing*. When brands slap LGBTQ+ symbols on their products to signal support without doing anything substantive to back it up, it is clearly for profit rather than authenticity.<sup>6</sup> The term is part of a broader trend of *woke washing* which is appropriation of social activism language in marketing.<sup>42</sup> This concept is not new or unusual. The most popular form is *greenwashing* – when companies act like they care about the environment and sustainability but in reality, are damaging it beyond repair. *Pink washing* is when brands support breast cancer charities, but their products are known to cause cancer. Yes you read that right. Some cleaning products were found to do this and somehow still got praise for supporting those with breast cancer.

With younger generations showing strong support for queer rights, rainbow marketing has become increasingly common.<sup>43,44,45</sup> These campaigns often rely on the same visuals of rainbow flags, “love is love” slogans, and Pride-themed logos.<sup>46,47</sup> But not everyone sees these symbols as authentic. While many LGBTQ+ individuals associate the flag with safety and solidarity, others, especially those from marginalised racial or gender identities, see it as overly commercial and exclusionary.<sup>48,49</sup>

Indeed, research shows that mainstream LGBTQ+ representation in ads tends to centre white, middle-class, able-bodied gay men.<sup>50</sup> Other identities, like lesbians, bisexuals, and trans individuals, are often left out. This kind of stereotyping doesn’t just flatten diverse experiences but it reinforces limiting expectations and leaves many people feeling invisible.<sup>51</sup>



Photographed by Amanda Picotte



Photographed by Amanda Picotte

# *What the Research Needs to Ask Next*

So far, the research has largely looked at rainbow washing through the lens of marketing. It aims to look for what works, what doesn't, and how it shapes brand perception. What's missing is the emotional impact and how queer individuals actually feel when they see these campaigns. How do these messages shape their sense of visibility, or affect their trust in brands?



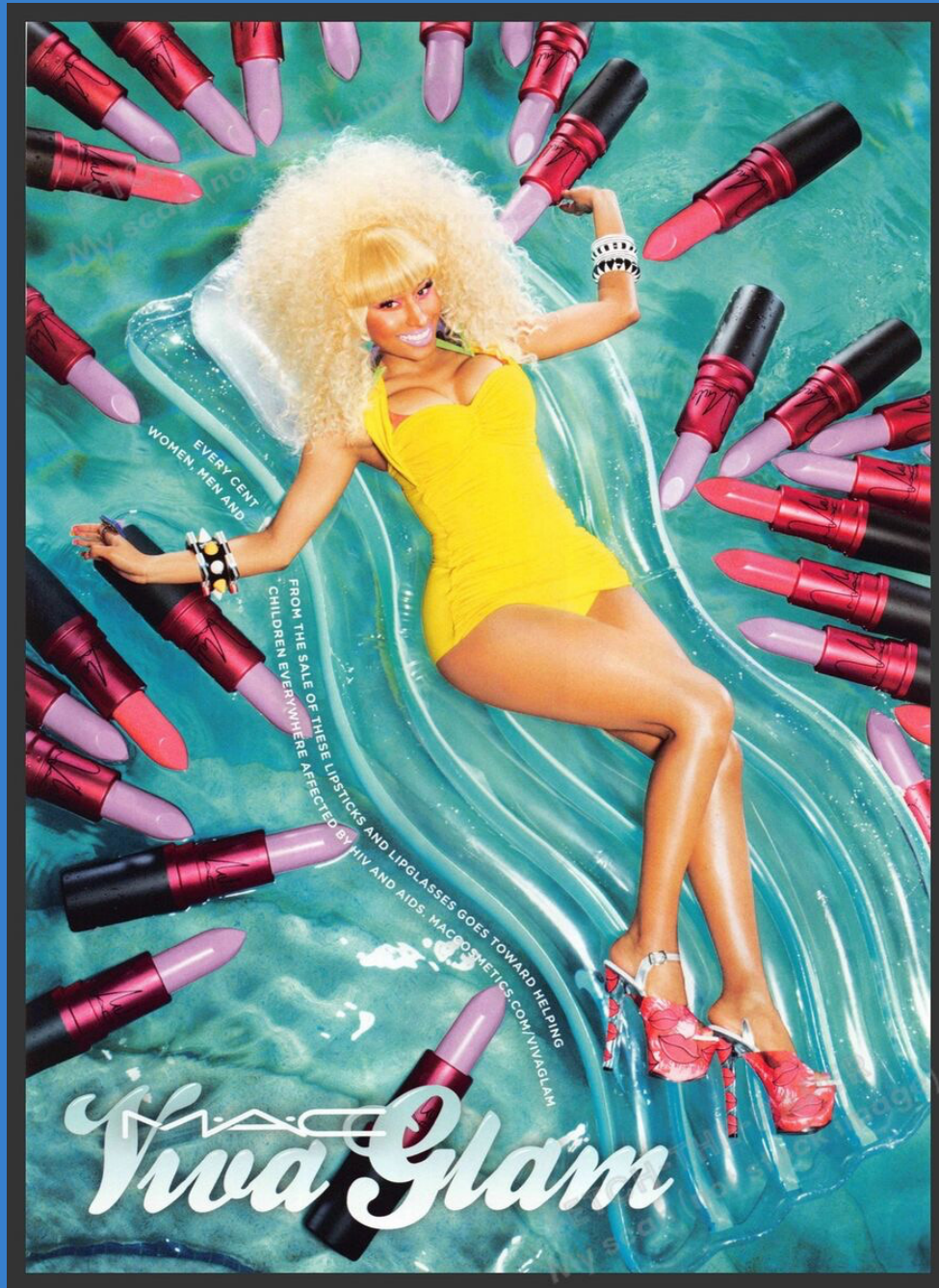
Photograph by Emily Manning

Photograph by Pau Villanueva



What's also often overlooked is the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community itself. Much of the literature focuses on white, cisgender gay men, failing to account for the broader range of experiences. This study aims to fill that gap. We examined how queer consumers interpret fashion brands' Pride campaigns and how it impacts their sense of representation and identity.

Nicki Manaj for MAC's VIVA LA GLAM Lipstick



# Our Research

# Methodology

Photographed by Amanda Picotte

We interviewed fourteen queer identifying individuals aged 20-31. There were five **lesbians**, four **bisexuals**, two **gay** people and three **queer** people.

Pronouns included she/her, she/they, he/him, non-binary and any pronouns. Participants were British, Irish, Spanish, Swedish, French and Middle Eastern. This wide range of sexualities, genders and nationalities helped give a variety of different views due to people's different experiences.



Participants were asked a range of questions, with appropriate follow up questions depending on answers. The concept of rainbow washing was also explained for those who wanted or needed it.

Participants answers were then analysed using a technique called Thematic Analysis. Here common themes many participants discussed were explored.

*Questions included:*

- Do you think a lot about what you wear when you get dressed in the morning?
- Do clothes affect your confidence?
- Are you restricted by what you can wear, for example by work, university or other outside pressures?
- Do you use clothing to express your sexuality?
- If you have noticed these rainbow washing campaigns during Pride month specifically, how do you feel about brands promoting LGBTQ+ causes during pride month versus the rest of the year?
- How important is it for you that a brand actively engages with LGBTQ+ issues year-round?
- If you have seen any campaigns where you suspect rainbow washing or a pride campaign you thought was legitimate, how did it make you feel?
  - Did it change your attitudes towards the brand?
  - Did it make you want to buy/not buy from the company?
- What impact do you think rainbow washing has on LGBTQ+ visibility and representation?
- Do you think rainbow washing can still be useful for the community?
- What are your thoughts on the use of the pride rainbow flag for many of the campaigns?
- Do you know of any or can you think of any other alternatives to explicit LGBTQ+ marketing, like the use of rainbows?

# Our Findings

This section looks into how queer people feel about rainbow washing in the fashion world. It dives into topics like how clothes connect to self-expression, how pride-themed campaigns affect visibility and representation, and what these campaigns really mean to the community. Since this was an exploratory study, the main themes weren't decided in advance, but rather naturally came up through conversations with participants, letting their voices shape the story.

## Identified themes include...

Identity

Representation

Authenticity

The Pride Flag

Pride Month

Global Perspective

Future Aspirations



Photographed by Lucian Konec for Vogue

# Identity

## *Clothing and Identity*

Participants spoke about how clothing affected their confidence and is influenced by their personality, for example, one participant said they “feel more confident” when they think they “look good” in their outfit. Another participant explains clothing is “a very large part of ... self-expression”.

Other participants however were negatively affected by their clothes. Their confidence decreased and they felt “self-conscious” wearing clothing they felt didn’t reflected them positively. In addition, “wearing Pride stuff” made them “feel alienated, not seen”, highlighting the need for clothing to portray one’s identity.

This is linked to Social Cognitive Theory,<sup>28</sup> which explains that individuals belief in themselves is shaped through the interaction of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. In this context, clothing functions as an environmental influence that can affect one’s sense of confidence and capability.

Essentially, if we feel good in what we are wearing, it improves how we see ourselves and therefore how we behave. Think about it, if you are having a good or bad hair day it can affect how you feel and act all day.



### *Sexuality and Gender Expression*

Participants said clothes were a signifier of their sexuality and that they might “dress gay” even if “it’s not necessarily conscious”. Other participants explain the clothes they wear express their “sexuality and personality” and are a form of “self-expression”.

Another perspective emerged from gender queer individuals, who explain “gender is more of something [they’re] conscious of”.

One participant explains how clothing is a signifier for their gender:

**“As like a trans person, to express gender identity, as especially like pre medical transition [clothing is] the only kind of clue you can give people to hopefully get ... perceived in the way you want to be perceived”**



Photographed by  
Laurence Philomène

Echoing what previous research has shown, we found that fashion can be a powerful way for people to express their sexuality or gender identity. For some, these choices are intentional, where people carefully curate a look to reflect who they are. For others, it's more instinctive, with style shaped by the media and queer culture around them. Take, for example, a bisexual woman opting for a septum piercing not just as a symbol, but because she's seen others like her wearing it and feels a sense of connection. Or consider the carabiner, a small accessory that's grown into a quiet signifier within the lesbian community. For many, it's less about the item itself and more about the people they associate it with and those they admire, relate to, or see themselves in.

# Representation

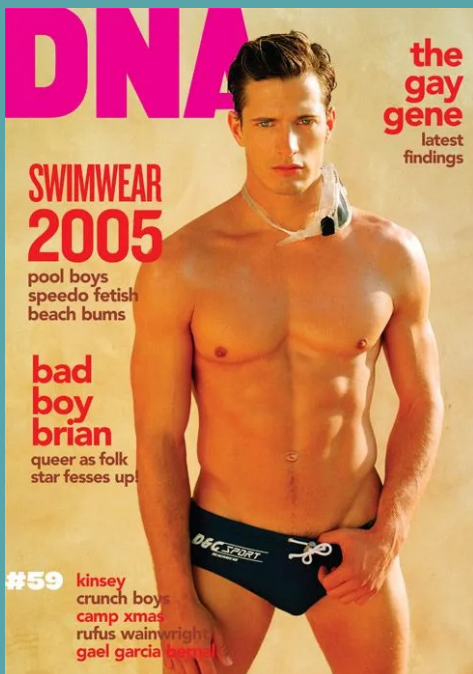
## *Focus on Cis-Gender, White Gay Men*

Since the gay rights movement took off in the 1970s, mainstream queer representation has largely centred around white, cisgender gay men. At the time, this made sense—they were among the most visible and most impacted during the AIDS epidemic, and they urgently needed support. And they got it.

But have you ever wondered why the LGBTQ+ acronym starts with an “L”? Lesbians were some of the first to step up and care for gay men during the AIDS crisis—so the “L” comes first as a nod to that solidarity.

Fast-forward 50 years, and the landscape has shifted. Gay men are no longer the primary target of media-fuelled hate. Today, it’s transgender individuals who face the harshest scrutiny. They are relentlessly attacked by policy and press, as if they haven’t always been part of the community.

One participant pointed out that media often selects queer representations that are “palatable for the masses,” and that trans people simply don’t fit that narrow mold. Another shared, “When you think of gay, you think of an effeminate white man,” adding that images of men in speedos or lifting weights often come to mind. These reductive stereotypes push everyone else, bisexual people, lesbians, trans people and queer people of colour, to the margins, making it harder for their voices to be heard and their identities to be seen.



DNA Magazine cover 2009

### *Lack of Transgender Representstion*

When queer representation focuses too heavily on just one part of the community, the rest are often left out. Many participants noted that there's "barely anything that includes trans people" in typical Pride campaigns. And it's not just about visibility in marketing but trans products are frequently overlooked, too.

Several participants pointed out the lack of truly inclusive clothing options in mainstream fashion. Essentials like trans-specific underwear or gender-affirming garments are often hard to find in the UK and have to be ordered from abroad. These aren't niche accesories but rather basic necessities. Without access to safe, well-designed options, people are forced to improvise, sometimes in ways that can harm their bodies.

Take chest binding, for example. When done with a proper binder, it can be safe and empowering. But using tape, or squeezing into too-small sports bras, can lead to serious health risks. We can't help but think it echoes the painful corsets women were expected to wear in the 18th century. It's a reminder that fashion, when it excludes, can do more harm than good.



Photograph by  
Laurence Philomène



Photograph of Laurence Philomène



Photographed by Campbell Addy



Photographed by Fabian Guerrero

### *Diversity in the Community*

The media often likes to pack 'gay' into a tight little box and ignore the wide diversity within the community. It is important to consider the intersectionality between gender, race, nationality and sexuality. These factors do not act alone, but impact each other, resulting in a varied range of experiences by those in the queer community.

Many participants acknowledged that the queer community is inherently diverse and cannot be encapsulated by a singular representation. It was noted, it is a “broad” space, comprising of “very diverse pool of people” with varying identities and experiences. Participants suggested this diversity challenges portraying the LGBTQ+ community as one.



Photographed by Michael Bailey-Gates

# Authenticity

## *Brand Motivation*

For many participants, it felt like brands were less interested in supporting the queer community and more focused on cashing in. As one put it, the goal often seems like a “money grab”, with another describing it as brands “exploiting” the community to “hop on the trend” during Pride Month.

The sense was clear: most Pride campaigns are driven by profit, not genuine allyship. One participant pointed out that you can often tell a brand’s true intentions by looking beyond the rainbow packaging and into the company’s track record:

**“The same people [are] holding the company, so are they actually doing the work or are they just trying to keep selling?”**

This speaks to a wider feeling that authenticity can’t be faked. For a campaign to truly resonate, it has to reflect a brand’s values year-round, not just in June, and be backed by real, lasting action.

This links back to what previous research found regarding CSR fit. When a company’s actions and ‘vibe’ doesn’t match with the pride collection they are selling, it doesn’t seem genuine. And when they do seem genuine, its usually obvious.

## *Rainbow Washing*

Participants were clear in their thoughts that rainbow washing doesn’t help the queer community - it exploits it. Going into the interviews, we expected that some people might see a silver lining, perhaps arguing that even performative recognition brings visibility. But most participants disagreed. For them, fake support was worse than no support at all.

As one put it, rainbow washing “commodifies [queer people] rather than educates” the cisgender, heterosexual majority. The consensus was that these campaigns are shallow and “feel opportunistic” rather than meaningful.

When it came to Pride-themed clothing, the feedback was blunt and negative. One participant described it as often just plain “ugly.” The rainbow-covered, slogan-heavy designs that flood stores each June don’t reflect the style or taste of many queer fashion-conscious people. Instead, participants said they’d prefer to see subtle, thoughtful updates to a brand’s core collections. They want pieces they could wear year-round, not just during Pride.



Photographed by Ryan Pfluger

# The Pride Flag



Photograph by Amanda Picotte

The Pride flag carries different meanings for different people. Some participants described it as “a symbol that is there for the whole gay community”, creating a sense of unity and belonging. In certain spaces, it can act as an “indicator of safety”, signalling where queer people might feel welcomed and supported. For example, one participant spoke about the “gay Spar” in Dublin. This is a regular corner shop that, for some reason, is decked out with Pride flags. They saw it as a light-hearted, fun gesture that also symbolised unity and support for the queer community.



Gay Spar, Dublin

Some participants spoke about how the Pride flag can be especially meaningful for younger queer people who are still figuring out their sexuality or gender. For children, simply seeing the flag and knowing they’ll be accepted, no matter who they turn out to be, can create a safe space for self-discovery, free from judgment.

But not everyone sees it so positively. Some expressed discomfort with how the flag is used, especially on clothing, saying it can feel like “you have to identify yourself”. Instead of helping queer people feel integrated, the symbol can sometimes underline their difference.

One participant reflected more deeply on how the flag’s historical and cultural meaning is often lost in commercial contexts:

**“It’s reducing the flag down to, like, just being a rainbow, when it’s not just a rainbow, it is symbolic”**

Their words capture a broader concern of when stripped of its context, the Pride flag risks becoming more of a marketing tool than a meaningful emblem of queer resistance, history, and pride.

# A Global Perspective

This study brought together voices from across the globe including British, Irish, French, Swedish, Middle Eastern, and Spanish participants. This offered a diverse mix of perspectives on Pride and rainbow washing. Their stories highlighted how culture, location, and personal experience can shape how queerness is understood and celebrated.

A shared sentiment among many was that London offers a sense of freedom that's hard to find elsewhere. Participants from smaller towns and cities spoke about how being queer wasn't as accepted where they grew up, making their move to London feel like a breath of fresh air. One participant described how, after arriving in the city, she was amazed by the sheer visibility of Pride with rainbow flags everywhere, brands showing support, and a sense of being seen. Over time, she began to recognise that much of it was performative, but still, compared to what she'd known before, it meant something. London, for all its flaws, remains a place where people from all walks of life can come together and that kind of diversity has helped breed a deeper sense of acceptance.



London Pride, 2023,  
Photographed by  
Lucian Koncz for Vogue

But this sense of progress isn't universal. A powerful point raised in our conversations was about where and how brands choose to promote their Pride campaigns. While many companies roll out flashy initiatives in the UK or US, they often go silent elsewhere. There's no rainbow branding in their Dubai stores, no Pride posts on their Russian social media accounts. For some, this selective visibility is proof of performative allyship. If brands truly stood with the queer community, they wouldn't hide their support when it's inconvenient or politically risky.

Of course, some argue that this is simply a business decision - brands push Pride where it sells. But to many participants, this approach contradicts the spirit of Pride, which is about being bold, being proud, and standing your ground. After all, queerness has always been about resisting the status quo, not appeasing it.

Cultural background also shaped how participants felt Pride should look. One participant from the Middle East shared that, in their view, Pride should be more modest and family-oriented, showcasing the shared values between queer and heterosexual relationships, like love, care, and community. In contrast, participants from the UK saw Pride as a celebration which is a vibrant, unapologetic party that takes up space.

These contrasting views remind us that queerness isn't a monolith. Pride means different things to different people and trying to package it neatly for mass consumption is bound to fall short. For brands, this is a challenge, but it's also an opportunity to do better, listen more, and move beyond the rainbow logo.



London Pride, 2022,  
Photographed by Christina Fragkou for Vogue



Photographed by  
Lucian Koncz for Vogue



Photographed by  
Lucian Koncz for Vogue

# What We Want to Change

## *Transparency*

Many participants expressed a desire for more transparency around Pride-related campaigns. One person suggested something as simple as adding a note on the clothing tag or a barcode that links to more information. To them, that level of openness would make it easier to understand exactly how brands are supporting the queer community. It's such an easy thing to do, it raises the question: why aren't they doing it?

Others echoed this sentiment, pointing out that big corporations often "aren't transparent with people." Without clear information or context, it's easy for companies to exaggerate the positive impact of their campaigns, making their support feel hollow. In contrast, participants felt that smaller, independent brands tend to come across as more authentic, especially when their contributions to the community are direct and visible.

Some even argued that maybe it's time to leave Pride campaigns to these local brands, the ones genuinely connected to the cause, instead of handing it over to big-name corporations that seem more interested in profit than people.

There was also a strong sense that a lack of transparency isn't accidental. One participant reflected:

**"[Companies] try to throw it in your face, as a way to like, divert you from what they actually do."**

In other words, Pride campaigns might be used as a shiny distraction from bigger issues behind the scenes. In a time when corporate scandals are a dime a dozen, it's no wonder some consumers are starting to question whether a rainbow logo really tells the full story.





Transgender model Vivian Wilson, for Wildfang, a queer-owned business

### *Workforce*

Many participants stressed the importance of uplifting queer voices internally if brands want their Pride campaigns to actually mean something. Including LGBTQ+ people in the creative process leads to more authentic work which reflects real experiences and the everyday struggles of the community. As one participant put it, there's no doubt that a queer person can create a better Pride campaign than someone who's not.

They bring lived knowledge, cultural awareness, and a deep-rooted connection that can't be faked.

Company structures came up a lot in our conversations, particularly noting how inclusive hiring practices can make or break the future of LGBTQ+ marketing. If the people making decisions don't represent the audience they're trying to reach, the message can easily fall flat.

Participants also pointed out that internal support matters just as much as external messaging. One person explained that even if a brand appears supportive from the outside, queer employees can still feel excluded if that support isn't echoed internally. Educating staff, they said, is key. A lot of companies have policies around how to respond to homophobia but fewer focus on how to prevent it altogether. Much of what gets labelled as 'homophobia' is really just ignorance, and it's up to companies to close that gap. Simple things like understanding pronouns, respecting boundaries, and knowing what's appropriate can go a long way in creating a truly inclusive environment.

Another point raised was around who gets the spotlight during Pride. One participant summed it up like this: they'd rather "gay [brands get] amplified rather than normal brands become gay." That means supporting queer-owned businesses, not just once a year, but consistently. These are the brands already rooted in the community, and partnering with them makes more sense than rainbow washing products that have nothing to do with queer culture. As one participant joked, when a kitchenware brand drops a rainbow knife for Pride, it's hard to take it seriously. For any campaign to feel genuine, the brand's core values need to reflect real support, not just seasonal marketing.

Carmen Liu,  
the UK's first lingerie  
brand for tucking  
underwear



# Genuine Prid



Levi's 'Meet You in the Park' Pride Collection

20

# e Collections



Puma 'Equal Love  
Confederation' Collection

25

# A Guide to Finding Genuine Pride Collections

When shopping for Pride merchandise or Pride affiliated clothing you must ask yourself some questions. Unfortunately, research before purchase is necessary and time consuming, but isn't it worth it? Many brands do not aim to support the community, but rather aim to exploit it. Although their clothes may be cute and a summer 'must have', they are damaging to the wider cause.

Next time you are buying clothes like this ask yourself...

## **Is this company benefiting the queer community?**

For example, donating to queer charities, collaborating with queer artists, educating the public on queer history

## **Where are these clothes sourced?**

Many companies claim to support the queer community, but have their pride collection made in countries where it is illegal to be gay. That doesn't add up, does it? Imagine working in one of those factories as a queer person who can't be themselves in their countries, or even wear the clothing they are making.

## **What are the employee recruitment policies like?**

With Trump's rollback of DEI policies in the US, many companies have followed suit. This means companies are no longer aiming for diversity and inclusion in the workplace. This can allow for an environment of exclusion and judgment.

# Example: Levi's 'Meet You in the Park' Collection



Six embroidered patches were made with tattoo artist José Luis Sanabria of Castro Tattoo - working with local artists

Queer people and queer business owners were used to model the collection

LEVI STRAUSS & CO. Work With Us

Values

## Bringing Pride to Life

June 1, 2025

Unzipped Staff  
Levi Strauss & Co.

This year, Levi Strauss & Co. is once again showing up alongside members of the LGBTQ+ community to celebrate Pride through its annual Levi's® Pride collection, sponsorships of Pride parades and donations to organizations championing equality. These efforts are designed to honor and uphold decades of solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community and a long-held commitment to equality for all.

Read on to discover how we're bringing Pride to life this month.

### An Homage to History

The 2025 Levi's®Pride collection centers around the themes of togetherness, safe spaces and resilience, all of which have been fundamental to LGBTQ+ communities over the past half century and beyond. Following extensive archival research, the collection was crafted with great care by Levi's® designers – many of whom identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves – and includes nods to significant moments of LGBTQ+ history. Designs throughout the collection honor efforts by the community to reclaim and redefine symbols that have had different and at times fraught meanings over time but continue to carry profound significance today. This includes the upside-down pink triangle, a symbol once used to call out and persecute LGBTQ+ individuals but later reclaimed by pioneers like Harvey Milk and residents of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood to signify remembrance, resilience and pride.

Committed to making a more inclusive workplace - Won Forbes 'Best Employer for Diversity' in 2024

Updated and current Pride Collection information

Educating consumers

collection aims to reclaim and redefine symbols which were once rooted in hate

Clothes produced in countries where being gay is illegal eg India

However, they are transparent about this in their sustainability section of the website, with clear sourcing

Supports communities around the world - taking part in Warsaw Pride Parade, Poland Also, supports global initiatives such as Outright International, and GiveOut

# Conclusion



# An Afterword from the Researcher

I chose to explore this topic because of my deep interest in corporate social responsibility and the influence fashion brands have in shaping cultural narratives. In recent years, the discourse around Pride and queerness has shifted and sometimes in uncomfortable ways. It can feel like the conversation has become polarised, like it's an "us vs them" situation, when in reality, it shouldn't be. Regardless of gender or sexuality, people are just people. Yet somehow, the world remains caught up in issues that, at their core, don't affect anyone outside of someone's own home. The recent rise in hate and discrimination against transgender individuals has been especially difficult to witness.

This dissertation, and this magazine, were created to spark conversation and encourage reflection. Once you start to recognise how widespread performative allyship is, not just towards the queer community, but toward many marginalised groups, it becomes harder to look the other way. It's my hope that by shining a light on these issues, more people can begin to question, learn, and hold the brands they support to a higher standard.



Photograph by Emmie America

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