



# Representation, Self-Determination, and Refusal: Queer People’s Experiences with Targeted Advertising

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## ABSTRACT

Targeted online advertising systems increasingly draw scrutiny for the surveillance underpinning their collection of people’s private data, and subsequent automated categorization and inference. The experiences of LGBTQ+ people, whose identities call into question dominant assumptions about who is seen as “normal,” and deserving of privacy, autonomy, and the right to self-determination, are a fruitful site for exploring the impacts of ad targeting. We conducted semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals (N=18) to understand their experiences with online advertising, their perceptions of ad targeting, and the interplay of these systems with their queerness and other identities. Our results reflect participants’ overall negative experiences with online ad content—they described it as stereotypical and tokenizing in its lack of diversity and nuance. But their desires for better ad content also clashed with their more fundamental distrust and rejection of the non-consensual and extractive nature of ad targeting. They voiced privacy concerns about continuous data aggregation and behavior tracking, a desire for greater control over their data and attention, and even the right to opt-out entirely. Drawing on scholarship from queer and feminist theory, we explore targeted ads’ *homonormativity* in their failure to represent multiply-marginalized queer people, the harms of automated inference and categorization to identity formation and *self-determination*, and the *theory of refusal* underlying participants’ queer visions for a better online experience.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI.**

## KEYWORDS

targeted advertising, LGBTQ+ populations, homonormativity, refusal

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“What does queer theory have to do with research in advertising?” asked Kates [36], well before the rise of targeted online advertising systems. Today, ad revenue drives the billion-dollar valuations of the most profitable big tech companies [55], which amass users’ public and private data to train the algorithmic systems that sell, serve, and assess the efficacy of targeted ads [62]. In exchange for the features these sociotechnical platforms freely provide, users are subjected (knowingly and otherwise) to the tracking of their online and offline behavior, and to automated inference-making about their identities and interests [55, 62]. Platforms segment and label users so they can be more accurately targeted by the businesses interested in purchasing digital window space and buying aggregated user data [63, 68]. Despite the ubiquity of these systems, they are notoriously opaque, often preventing users from seeing or controlling the data collected about them, or from verifying, editing, or erasing the labels they have been assigned.

Exploring the experiences of marginalized people with sociotechnical systems provides the opportunity to deeply interrogate the power these systems hold over all of our lives. Just as previous literature has explored the harmful effects of targeted ad systems on people from oppressed racial groups and those with histories of eating disorders [12, 23, 56], we return to Kates [36]’s question about queer theory and ads to study queer people’s experiences with targeted online advertising. The following three research questions guide our research:

- RQ1:** How do queer people experience targeted advertising content (the ads themselves)?
- RQ2:** How do they experience targeted advertising systems (including inference, categorization, and other aspects)?
- RQ3:** What changes would queer people see as improving their experience with targeted ads?

To explore these questions, we interviewed 18 LGBTQ+ individuals, diverse in race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other attributes. Our findings reflected widespread dissatisfaction with targeted ads, including with the lack of queer representation and other forms of diversity in ads, and with the non-consensual and extractive nature of ad targeting systems. Instead, participants desired a range of reforms, from the moderate—more representative and nuanced ad content, more transparent ad systems—to the more radical—the abolition of surveillance, automated categorization, and the capitalist ad industry that leverages its users for profit. We draw on theory from queer and feminist studies to contextualize and analyze our queer participants’ experiences and desires: homonormativity and limitations of diverse representation, self-determination and the importance of autonomy, and the generative power of refusal.

Queer individuals, whose varying degrees of marginalization situate them as “edge cases” in the context of inference-based systems, therefore have a unique vantage on them. In the sections that follow, we examine and analyze the insights of our cohort of interviewees as they describe and reimagine targeted advertising from a queer perspective.

## 2 RELATED WORK

We contextualize our work on queer people’s experiences with targeted ads in three areas of related work that inform our current study: the documented dangers and harms of targeted advertising, queer studies literatures—especially related to advertising, and prior work on queerness in the context of sociotechnical systems.

### 2.1 Dangers of Targeted Advertising

Damaging stereotypes have long been observed in ad content. Encoded messages in targeted ads that represent narrow definitions of individual identity can perpetuate stereotypes and further discrimination of marginalized groups [53]. Latanya Sweeney’s pioneering work in discriminatory online ads found a statistically significant difference in ads that suggested the existence of arrest records when a user searched Google for Black-sounding names instead of white-sounding names [56]. The results in Sweeney’s study illustrated how harmful stereotypes of identity persist in ad systems. Moreover, individuals with marginalized identities are more likely to react negatively to advertising that emphasizes seemingly positive stereotypes, such as the “model minority” myth [52, 67], based solely on their group membership without regard for their individual character [35, 38]. Blum [10] illustrates how well-meaning but stereotypical depictions of Black people as “great dancers” in ads ignore the historical connection to the imagery of enslaved Black people joyfully dancing that served to justify slavery.

Biased ad targeting can also result in harm to marginalized groups. Empirical studies have examined the material effects of predatory and discriminatory practices in online ad systems. For example, Gak et al. [23] interviewed individuals with histories of disordered eating and found that participants generally believed they saw weight-loss ads due to harmful inferences about their interests and identities drawn from their online behavior and demographics. The *predatory inclusion* [43] of individuals with disordered eating in targeted weight-loss ads’ audience segments exploits participants’ vulnerabilities and provokes feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-worth for extractive purposes. Moreover, predatory inclusion can also cause financial harm, for instance, in the case of for-profit colleges being marketed to Black women who are disproportionately burdened by student loan debt [46].

Conversely, harm can also occur when marginalized communities are *excluded* from receiving ads. Various studies have also shown that marginalized communities are excluded from receiving housing, employment, and credit ads on different platforms due to gender and racial bias in ad systems, indicating broader issues in online ad delivery systems [18, 33, 39, 54], even in cases where the advertiser actively tried to ensure balanced audience reach [2]. Likewise, Chang et al. [12]’s examination of higher education targeted advertising revealed that ostensibly demographic-agnostic variables like zip codes can act as proxies for demographic variables

like race that preclude marginalized communities from equitable access to opportunities in higher education.

### 2.2 Queer Studies and Advertising

We draw on queer studies to understand the specific harms visited upon queer people by their targeted advertising experiences, from homonormative content to externally imposed inference and categorization. First, we must understand the concept of identity concerning queerness. Rather than viewing identity as produced or existing strictly internally to an individual, queer studies frameworks posit that “identity is produced by constraints, social norms, and other specters of the material beyond one’s knowledge and agency” [41]. Queer theory, in conversation with feminist theory, Black studies, indigenous studies, anti-colonial theory, and anti-capitalist analyses, interrogates binaries like those of gender, sex, and sexuality, and confronts the sociopolitical power differentials that, in turn, shape and are shaped by queerness [21, 27].

Literature in queer studies has also documented how systems that oppress marginalized people also pervert those identity categories into consumer segments under capitalism [31, 66]. Historically, advertising has included few if any depictions of LGBTQ+ identity, with the depictions that did exist remaining very normative in other aspects like race, gender expression, and class [5, 36, 47, 60]. According to scholarship on traditional advertising, such depictions that attempt to normalize queerness or present it through a heterosexual gaze are partly a result of the lack of queer representation among advertisers themselves [15], something that likely holds true of targeted advertising systems as well, as LGBTQ+ people are also underrepresented in that industry [3].

Queer explorations of print ads have long understood that queerness and advertising exist at odds. Before the era of online ads, Kates [36] described advertising as a *discursive practice*: “an activity informed by dominant sexual sociocultural influences”. Hennessy [31] writes that “visibility is ... a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects”, describing the tension between assimilation, commodification, and representation that is inherent to the use of queer imagery in advertising. Valdes [65] formalizes heteropatriarchy as “the bifurcation of personhood into ‘male’ and ‘female’ components under the active/passive paradigm; the polarization of these male/female sex/gender ideals into mutually exclusive, or even opposing, identity composites; the penalization of gender atypicality or transitivity; and the devaluation of persons who are feminized.” (In prefixing “cis-”, as in cisgender, the oppression of transgender people is explicitly named.) In other words, prior work shows that advertising targeting queer people has always reflected the cisheteropatriarchal power held by those who produce and disseminate it, themes we explore in the context of behavioral targeting and inference-making arising from online advertising.

### 2.3 Queer Experiences with Sociotechnical Systems

As queer people face compounding harms on online platforms, centering the experiences of queer communities in work related to sociotechnical systems is critical, as such platform choices can have important material effects on people’s safety and well-being.

Using a custom browser extension [24], Cuevas et al. [17] quantified the number of Facebook users assigned potentially sensitive ad preferences, including by sexual orientation. Alarming, they found that the system tagged some with the *Homosexuality* interest label, including in countries where homosexuality is illegal and punishable by death.

Transgender identity has also received focus at the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and sociotechnical systems. In the space of advertising, work by Bivens [9] explores social networks' changing operationalization of gender over time, finding that earlier versions of Facebook did not force users to identify within the gender binary—only when binary gender classification became valuable for ad targeting did “gender [become] a fundamental part of the product” [9]. Binary gender is still used in Facebook's—now Meta's—ad platform, despite providing users with dozens of gender identity options to choose on their profiles [20, 44]. Several qualitative studies have examined trans people's experiences with other technologically-mediated systems [49], including automated gender recognition systems [28, 37]. Such work is especially relevant and important in the context of increasing social and legislative attacks on trans people in recent years [1, 16, 26].

Work in the AI ethics community has also begun calling attention to risks for queer individuals (and others), including surveillance and privacy violations, as well as identity misrepresentation [4, 29]. To combat these risks, Andrus and Villeneuve [4] recommend participatory governance models that directly involve the end-users whose data is being collected. This perspective is echoed by Birhane et al. [8], who have examined marginalized groups' lack of involvement in technology development and the need to include the perspectives of those most likely to be harmed. Tomasev et al. [59] also emphasize the challenges of studying sexual orientation and gender identity in traditional fairness research, arguing for *queer fairness* in the development of AI systems, including ensuring LGBTQ+ people are given a safe environment to contribute. Although existing work points to a need for human-centered queer inclusivity in sociotechnical systems, there remains limited work in the space of fairness, accountability, and transparency. With this paper, we aim to contribute to this nascent literature.

### 3 METHOD

We recruited and interviewed 18 adults identifying as LGBTQ+, conducted interviews, and qualitatively analyzed the resulting transcripts. We elaborate more below.

#### 3.1 Participant Recruitment & Demographics

Outreach was conducted by distributing a flyer through email lists known to the authors and through large, international Facebook groups whose members identified as LGBTQ+. Our goal was to recruit a diverse group of participants in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. Our flyer described the study and its eligibility requirements (that participants be over 18 years old and self-identify as LGBTQ+), and asked that interested participants email us. We recruited a total of 18 participants; for a detailed breakdown of participant demographics, see Table 1.

#### 3.2 Interview Protocol

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews over Zoom lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, which were recorded for transcription and analysis. Participants received a written consent form before the interviews and were compensated with a \$15 Amazon gift card distributed via email afterward. Participants in this paper are identified by unique anonymous identifiers (P1 - P18) to maintain their privacy. Our study was reviewed and approved by the Stanford University Institutional Review Board.

In the interviews, we asked about participants' experiences with online advertising in three parts: first asking questions about their experiences overall with *online ads*, second asking them to reflect on *ad targeting* and its relationship to various aspects of their identities, and third relating to their *identity as an LGBTQ+ person*. The complete interview guide is listed in Appendix A. At the close of the interview, we asked participants open-ended demographic questions, having them provide any or all of the following in their own words: age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality.

*Part 1: Online advertising.* We asked participants which platforms they were most active on, how frequently they encountered ads on those platforms, and what types of advertising they encountered. We also sought to understand how and why participants engaged with ads they considered compelling, asking participants to recall an ad they had recently interacted with and reflect on the characteristics, including aspects of the images or text, that drew their attention.

*Part 2: Ad targeting.* Next, to understand participants' beliefs about what inferences ad platforms may be making and how they believe such inferences are made, we asked them to reflect on the kinds of themes, people, and other imagery they usually see in their targeted ads, and speculate as to why they receive such content. We also explored the relationship of this content with multiple aspects of their identities, asking about feelings of misrepresentation and whether or not they *wanted* these identity aspects to be represented and/or inferred by ad targeting systems.

*Part 3: Targeted ads and LGBTQ+ identity.* In our final set of interview questions, we explored participants' perceptions of positive and negative impacts on LGBTQ+ people and communities. In relation to negative impacts, we asked further questions about participants' knowledge and use of strategies for avoiding ad targeting, as well as what they would like to see changed (including more realistic and more speculative ideas).

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

Though extant theoretical frameworks shaped our inquiries in this work, our goal was to let the patterns of our data guide our analysis, so we chose a reflexive approach [11]. Initially, one author conducted line-by-line open coding of all transcripts to develop a codebook of keywords and sub-keywords. Using this codebook, another author took a second pass, coding the transcripts a second time and updating, replacing, or adding additional keywords as needed. The first coding pass was conducted using NVivo qualitative analysis software, while the second was conducted using Delve for better collaboration. After collaborative discussions of the coded content, these two authors came to a consensus about the final set of codes and coded content. Examples of codes included:

ID	Age	Sexuality	Gender	Race & Ethnicity	Nationality
P1	19	Gay	Man	Middle Eastern	Iraqi
P2	32	Queer	Non-binary	White	American
P3	25	Queer	Woman	South Asian, Indian	Indian
P4	25	Panromantic Asexual	Non-binary	Asian, Chinese	American
P5	27	Queer	Non-binary	Non-Hispanic White	American
P6	26	Lesbian	Non-binary	White	American
P7	22	Lesbian	Non-binary	White	American
P8	26	Gay	Male	Non-Hispanic White	Danish
P9	23	Bisexual	Female	Black	American
P10	28	Queer	Non-binary	Middle Eastern	Turkish
P11	31	Lesbian	Trans Woman	White	American
P12	23	Gay	Male	Black	American
P13	41	Gay	Man	White	American
P14	23	Gay	Male	Asian	Taiwanese, American
P15	23	Queer	Non-binary	Latinx, Filipino	American
P16	23	Lesbian	Non-binary	White	American
P17	25	Lesbian	Woman	African	Kenyan
P18	32	Queer	Trans-masc boi	Chinese-American	Chinese, American

**Table 1: We interviewed 18 participants; self-reported demographics are recorded above.**

“binary gender norms”, “control/autonomy”, “lacking nuance”, and “feels creepy”.

Themes were collaboratively synthesized based on the most prevalent codes, developed narratively, and divided into three major sets of insights pertaining to participants’ views on ad *content*, ad *targeting* as it currently exists, and *ideals and alternatives* they envisioned. We re-referenced the interview transcripts to refine and finalize themes, ensuring they emerged as directly as possible from our data.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study involves data collection with LGBTQ+ individuals, a group that has specific privacy and safety concerns. This is especially true given the range of risks faced by some queer people due to their nationalities (homosexuality is still criminalized in some countries [57]), gender identities (transgender people, especially transfeminine people of color, face a disproportionate risk of violence [22]), and other attributes. We, the research team, took care in our recruitment, data collection, and analysis to retain their confidentiality, including not requiring participants to provide their legal names, compensating them using gift cards not attached to their legal identities, and ensuring that only the research team had access to the transcripts and recordings. Additionally, we acknowledge the tensions and risks inherent to conducting research focused on marginalized communities and individuals [40]. Our resulting analysis is not only shaped by a theoretical grounding in queer and feminist theory, but each author’s individual experiences as a person marginalized along the axes of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identities (with overlaps and privileges therein).

## 4 FINDINGS: AD CONTENT, AD SYSTEMS, AND ALTERNATIVES

In this section we present our findings, divided by the answers that emerged for each of our research questions, enumerated again below for reference:

- RQ1:** How do queer people experience targeted advertising content (the ads themselves)?
- RQ2:** How do they experience targeted advertising systems (including inference, categorization, and other aspects)?
- RQ3:** What changes would queer people see as improving their experience with targeted ads?

### 4.1 Representations of Queerness in Targeted Ad Content are Limited

We divide our findings regarding ad content into three main points: the overarching lack of representations of queerness, stereotypicality when such identities were seen in ads, and the particular lack of representation faced by those with multiple marginalized identities.

**4.1.1 Participants’ ads reflect heterosexual societal norms.** Although participants did widely report receiving ads targeted to them that depicted queer people, across the board they reported that many or most of the ads they saw were instead reflective of dominant heterosexual societal norms. P5 summarized, “I think there is starting to be some change, but I see a lot of ... stereotypically, traditionally beautiful [people in ads] who are tall, or thin, or white, or able-bodied, etc.” (P5). This was echoed by other participants; P16 described the people they saw as being “generally either thin white men or thin white women. Generally attractive people” (P16). Another, despite seeing some ads geared towards queer people, noted that “most of

the ads I see I typically feature straight couples” (P2). This aligns with prior work about ads’ reflections of dominant culture [60].

**4.1.2 Representations of queerness perpetuate stereotypes.** The overall lack of queer representation was exacerbated by the heavy presence of stereotypes in targeted ads seemingly intended to interest queer consumers. In line with Kates [36]’s assessment that advertising as an activity reflects dominant discourses, P1 described feeling caricatured: “It’s like the stereotype of what a gay man is ... like super dramatized, a point where I’m like, I don’t know anybody who acts like that. [...] I don’t know who’s relating to that; it’s [how] straight people think gay people act” (P1).

More specifically, participants mentioned seeing stereotypes relating queerness to promiscuity and substance use. P6 described some of the ads they saw as “hypersexualized”: “The advertisements are all, like, nightclub lighting, like all of these hot 32-year-olds with basically all their clothes off, dancing and making out with each other” (P6). They clarified, “I don’t think that’s bad, it looks like they’re having a great time, but it’s really weird. I’m not sure if I consider it offensive or not.” Another described the ads they saw representing queer people as “pertaining to drinking, like for beers” (P15). Unfortunately, this is nothing new; as prior literature has recorded, and some of our older participants remembered, such stereotypes reflect historical patterns in advertising [60]. P13 (age 41) noted, “It used to be [that] alcohol and cigarettes were the only companies [with] gay [representation in] ads, so that felt a little stigmatizing” (P13).

Other participants also felt misrepresented by content that, despite featuring appropriate representations of queerness, did not align with their own personal queer identities. For instance, a high-femme lesbian participant pointed out that the queer-targeted ads she received made “incorrect assumptions” about her gender presentation: “While I am gay, that does not immediately imply that I want to dress androgynously” (P11).

**4.1.3 Lack of diversity especially impacts those with intersecting identities.** The lack of diversity in ad content was especially noticeable for those holding multiple marginalized identities, including participants of color; trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming participants; those with disabilities; and fat participants.

A majority of participants observed a lack of racial diversity in their targeted ads; both white and non-white participants had their targeted advertisements dominated by depictions of white people. P1, a gay Iraqi man, described his targeted ads as being centered on white Western lifestyles and perspectives, sharing, “Any identities outside of that are super hard to see, or they’re super exaggerated” (P1). This was one of the most widely-reported themes; 14 out of 18 participants mentioned the overwhelming whiteness in their ads.

Gender-nonconforming participants noted that even when systems accurately determined their gender identities, their targeted ads reflected cisheteropatriarchal assumptions about their experiences. P6, a non-binary lesbian, reflected on the inadequacy of the lesbian representation they saw in ads: “Where there’s a lesbian couple, usually both women are white and very feminine [with] long hair—I don’t really think we’ll ever see that much butch [representation] because of the way our culture constructs what a beautiful woman looks like” (P6). A non-binary participant reported, “I feel

like [my ads] are targeted more towards trans men, or someone who’s more masculine than I am” (P2).

Participants also cited a lack of body diversity in the models they saw, in particular a lack of depictions of fatness and disability. Consistent with prior work [23], our participants considered this problematic: “I’m a fat person ... I’m part of a lot of groups for other fat people. I think a lot of ads show me weight loss [content] because they assume that ... I want to lose weight, so that’s one thing they get wrong” (P3). Another participant reported that their ads overlook “disability or chronic illness—I have some chronic illnesses and friends who do as well, and it can be hard to see ads that don’t represent your queer friend group” (P5).

## 4.2 Ad Targeting Processes Cause Harm to Queer People

Aside from their concerns about ad content, all participants reflected some degree of awareness and discomfort with ad targeting systems identifying them as queer, a type of inference they were easily able to identify: “[Unlike ads for straight people,] you can really tell the ad targeting is for queer people; [advertisers] make it so obvious” (P18). Their responses to these inference- and categorization-based systems’ treatment ranged from mild discomfort to experiences of significant emotional harm.

**4.2.1 Ad targeting made participants feel unsettled and unsafe.** While participants expressed frustration with targeted advertising that missed the mark, they shared that that accurate targeting often felt “creepy” (P8), “disconcerting” (P13), and even “scary” (P3). Creepiness, in particular, was a recurring theme. P3 reported feeling torn between the desire for convenience and this creepiness: “I get kind of creeped out when [ad systems] seem like they know a lot of things about my life and my interests. [...] From convenience sake, I’ll be more likely to see things that I’d be interested in ... but then, on the other hand, I don’t like advertisements and how all these places are collecting personal data about me” (P3).

Taking the same perspective from the opposite direction, P4 described that misrepresentative content sometimes felt reassuring, in that the ad targeting system “doesn’t really know me” (P4). Feeling “seen” by targeted ad systems frequently felt as much like surveillance as inclusion. In the United States, where most major ad platforms are based, legal protection of queer identities is based on the right to privacy [30]; it is unsurprising, then, that queer people’s privacy concerns are highly specific, and connected to their larger concerns about their civil rights. P11, a lesbian trans woman who expressed a desire for ads more relevant to her trans identity, expressed simultaneous concern: “I just don’t love the idea that the internet sees me for me, because that’s kind of dangerous sometimes. There are state legislatures and whole countries that have passed laws to try to make it difficult, if not straight-up impossible, for me to live” (P11).

**4.2.2 Participants made sense of ad targeting and its failures.** Participants had many plausible hypotheses for the mechanisms behind their targeted ads, including their own behaviors (P18: “I like to do creative writing so I go to baby name websites to look for names for my characters, and ... the ads might be thinking, oh this person is pregnant because they’re looking up baby names”), and advertisers

lacking nuanced understandings of queerness (P1, a gay middle eastern man, described many of his ads as “completely alienating to other members of the community [besides white gay men]”).

Another common explanation participants pointed to was the advertising industry itself. P14 described white-centric ad content as being reflective of “the nature of the advertising business”, as well as broader social norms: “A lot of the ads showcase white gay male models—cisgender, white models—which, I mean, that’s obviously problematic, but it’s also a reflection of kind of the hegemonic discourse that is almost always in queer spaces, right? Unless you’re in a particularly non-white space.” (P14)

#### 4.2.3 Corporate tokenization of queerness contributes to skepticism.

*I don’t want them to market toward me—like, I don’t think that companies can have a genuine care about communities that I’m part of, so I’d rather they [not] be fake and try to just get my money. (P4)*

Many participants were attuned to the financial incentives for brands targeting queer customers. They found this motive opportunistic and profit-seeking, describing it as undermining the value of representation: “They’re all trying to get me to buy things, that’s what their end goal is, because capitalism. So I feel like that’s a root of problematic advertising, is that they don’t really care about the impact, they just want you to buy” (P3). In the context of transgender representation, P18 expressed that increased inclusion felt shallow and performative: “[Many organizations are] jumping on the bandwagon, and when it actually comes down to supporting trans rights, they’re not there” (P18).

Several participants reported that this kind of opportunistic representation, which they described as tokenizing, insincere, or pink-washing, was especially common during Pride Month, even from brands and organizations that otherwise did not otherwise make an effort to include queer customers among their customer base: “During Pride Month in New York, where there were a lot of ads I felt didn’t really target me correctly—they were just like, here’s the corporation, we put a rainbow logo on it” (P5).

#### 4.2.4 Queer people suffer emotional harms due to ad targeting.

*I think it’s the ads that are creating unrealistic images of our community and of ourselves. (P8)*

As described in 4.1, participants found themselves targeted with some content that was obviously damaging, including ads for alcohol (given that members of the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately likely to suffer from substance abuse issues [50]), and those for weight loss (P3: “I would say, yeah, probably more so when I was younger than now, but still I would say [weight loss ads] probably do impact my body image issues”).

Participants, especially (but not exclusively) those identifying as trans and non-binary, frequently reported feeling misgendered by their targeted ads. Misgendering—when the gendered elements of language used or the underlying inferences made about someone are incongruent with an individual’s gender identity—is a form of harm commonly experienced by transgender people, though it can occur to others as well [42]. One non-binary participant (who does not identify as a woman) described feeling misgendered by their ads: “I feel the misrepresentation the most when it has to do with babies, and I feel like those ads are always very gendered, very targeted

towards women and society’s idea of [what] a mother or a woman is. [Those] ads make me feel very weird” (P2). Explaining the impact this has on their self-image, they said, “When I see ads, especially marriage- and pregnancy-related ads that are targeted towards women, it does make [me] feel like, oh no, is this how people [in real life] see me, if this is what my browsing data indicates?” (P2). A cisgender gay male participant also reported receiving ads targeted to women, and that this made him question his identity for a time: “I did struggle a lot with my gender identity for a while because when you’re constantly getting ... ads targeted for a female, I was like, how *do* I identify? [...] I think it does create a lot of confusion” (P1). This feeling of confusion was also echoed by a non-binary participant who reported that the oscillating gender essentialist extremes in their ads led them to conclude that these systems found their identity “confusing.” They explained, “For some reason I get a lot of ads related to pregnancy or having children. On the other end of the spectrum, I get a lot of ads for jocks straps, which I don’t really understand. But I think [the system is] very confused about what my gender is” (P18).

In addition to these direct harms, participants also expressed experiencing more nebulous harm caused by ads acting as a reminder of power and privilege in society at large. As P12 thoughtfully put it, “If [ad targeting] took into account [queer] identities, I would feel like at least I’m recognized in society. But if they do not ... I [am reminded that] I’m left out, that many people do not accept me as who I am” (P12).

### 4.3 Participants Desire Increased Diversity, Transparency, and Autonomy

In addition to understanding participants’ criticisms of ad targeting content and systems, we were interested in hearing their generative perspectives—changes they felt could improve their experiences with targeted ads. Proposed shifts included more diverse ad content, more transparency about the ad targeting process, more autonomy in the use and collection of people’s personal data, and the ability to forgo targeted advertising in its current form entirely.

#### 4.3.1 Queer people want more diversity in ad content.

*It has to be actually really nuanced and critical, it can’t just be representation for the sake of making [brands] look better on the surface. (P4)*

We previously discussed participants’ frustration with the prevalence of stereotypes in the content that they encountered. A solution many identified was to increase diverse representation in ad content. Participants highlighted the need for more racially diverse depictions of queer people, and for more body diversity in general. P16 voiced a desire to see more “people of all different appearances and sizes and races and presentations. A lot of times people like myself—thin, white, [female-assigned] people ... are the kind of [non-binary] people getting attention in the media.”

Even the participants most skeptical of targeted advertising’s impact on queer communities acknowledged the value that representation holds for queer people, especially for its role in the identity formation of queer youth:

*If there were to be more [queer] representation, I also think having [it normalize] our identities—how we*

look and how we identify, or who we are—having that normalized [for] someone who’s young, maybe younger than 12, [to] see this representation and feel some kind of connection to it. [...] That is monumental, and something I would advocate more for. (P15)

Participants did, however, understand visibility as a double-edged sword, with the potential to impact public perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and communities both positively and negatively—something supported by prior research in television and print advertising [7, 64]. As P16 put it: “You have to watch what’s going on out there, because for some people that aren’t in the LGBT community their only exposure to queer people might be through these ads, and they might be basing their views off those ads”.

Many participants noted that improved diversity should not be done solely to improve a brand’s rapport with queer consumers. Instead, they expressed a desire for advertisers to include nuanced queer representation in content with broad reach. To quote P2, “[I want] more queer people and queer relationship representation, just in mainstream ads—I feel like a lot of the queer ads I see are just for queer-specific things”. Moreover, they wanted advertisers to back up visual cues with action and not, in the words of P4, “be fake and try to just get my money.” P16 echoed the same sentiment, drawing on the idea of “rainbow capitalism” [13]: “I think if I got to the website and they were just using [queer imagery] to attract people and not following through—you know, rainbow capitalism—that would further turn me off from the product. But if they had marketing I felt represented in and also supported causes I believed in, I would be more likely to support them, for sure” (P16).

#### 4.3.2 *Queer people want more transparency and autonomy.*

*[It’s scary] how much we’re already monitored, and how much [ad systems] already know about me. [...] [I would prefer] increasing the amount of diversity within advertisements, without necessarily needing to know for sure if somebody identifies a certain way. (P15)*

The current user experience of ad platforms leaves little room for direct user input, a power differential noted by our participants. They were highly critical of the inference and categorization done by these systems and the lack of room for self-determination. They suggested alternatives, including greater transparency about how they were being targeted, the ability to express boundaries or discontent with certain ad content, and control over which advertisers could bid for their attention. For example, P1 began, “I wish [ads] in general communicated why they’re showing an ad to you” and also described wanting “autonomy over whether or not I want to disclose a certain part of my identity on my own terms ... rather than just being tracked” (P1).

P6 picked up this theme, describing unease with “the sense of being watched, being tracked,” and pointing out the particular privacy needs of many LGBT people that are not publicly out: “If you’re not out yet, [you might] be afraid that your mom’s going to be looking over your shoulder [while you are] scrolling through Instagram” (P6). Other participants also mentioned concerns about security and privacy online, including P14: “I think in the global Internet age everyone is very, very concerned about privacy and security. I don’t know what to do about that—and this is again

working with the assumption that I must live with [targeted] ads. I would rather have companies ask me [instead of inferring] ... so I can just decline” (P14).

4.3.3 *Queer people imagine the ability to opt out entirely.* Participants’ desire for autonomy frequently stemmed from a wish to escape ad targeting systems altogether. One participant made clear their desire to avoid ad targeting specifically, despite being comfortable and even interested in other types of ads: “Get rid of [it] ... I feel like people around me don’t shop based on seeing whatever is available in ads. [Instead they] buy things because they become popular, or [when] a curator”—a “real person, influencer or otherwise”—“promotes an item” (P10). When asked what she would change about ads if she could change anything, P11 also said, “I would probably get rid of it. If you gave me a magic wand that can change anything about online advertising, I wouldn’t have online advertising” (P11).

## 5 DISCUSSION: REPRESENTATION, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND REFUSAL

Next, we connect the findings from the previous section with scholarship from queer and feminist theory, discussing targeted ads’ *homonormativity* in their failure to adequately represent multiply-marginalized queer people, the lack of *self-determination* in ad systems’ lack of consent and automated inferences, and the *politics of refusal* underlying our participants’ visions for a more autonomous online experience.

### 5.1 Homonormativity in Targeted Ad Content

Advertising has played a key historical role in the normalization of LGBTQ+ individuals on a global scale, especially in the West [66]. As queer people received the opportunity to become full citizens through advancements in civil rights and legal protections, they also became an acceptable consumer segment for advertisers [61]. But the representation of queerness in traditional ad media has been an assimilationist project from the beginning; Tsai [60] writes: “[ads representing queerness] ignore, exclude, and trivialize the sexual and gender minorities who are more distant from the mainstream standard while incorporating the few economically privileged and gender normative subgroups.” As our participants reported, the representations put forth by advertisers to target queer consumers predominantly include maximally-normative depictions of queerness. The term in queer studies used to describe this pattern is *homonormativity*—queerness that upholds and sustains heteronormative assumptions and depoliticizes LGBTQ+ communities by anchoring queer culture in mainstream consumption [19].

Homonormativity describes the way queerness is assimilated into mainstream normalcy via consumerism, an apt lens for examining queer representation in advertising. As prior work has found, and our participants articulated, ads representing queerness generally prioritize white, cisgender, non-disabled, affluent, nuclear-family imagery [47]. They described this content as lacking nuance and reflecting stereotypes. Participants also reported homonormative patterns with respect to their treatment at the hands of advertising systems’ inferences and labels. This was especially apparent to non-binary users, who intuited the insistence on binary gender categories in ad systems that other scholars have



documented [44]. As one participant explained, “There’s not generally an option for non-binary in ad targeting. So they probably just pick one or the other, depending on what I’ve been searching recently, and give me a targeted ad based on that” (P16).

In addition to aptly describing participants’ experiences, homonormativity provides insights into participants’ desired improvements to their targeted ads. Most participants mentioned a desire for “more representation” or “greater diversity” in their ads—but understanding representation through the lens of homonormativity surfaces the inadequacy of such strategies. Given the homonormative styling advertisers seem bent on, this “fix” would continue to leave behind non-normative queers who cannot assimilate into heterosexual culture, thereby further weakening queer people’s mutual solidarity and dividing their political power. Notably, some participants were aware of these risks; for example, in discussing corporate tokenization of queerness, P6 said:

I always feel complicated when I see visibility increase through advertising, because it feels like we’ve made it far enough that we’re not a threat to corporations, they’re not going to lose profit off of us. [...] But also, once we reach that point it’s like, okay, well, what now? This is just a normal thing, and all these corporations are going to continue to— I don’t know, it just feels so weird, like the opposite of what community is supposed to be about, for me. (P6)

Inclusion may be an important step for advertisers to take—but one that is less crucial than soliciting and respecting people’s explicit consent to being labeled and targeted in the first place, a point we discuss next.

## 5.2 The Harms of Inference and Categorization

Current ad targeting systems are built on automated inference and categorization, never soliciting people’s explicit input or consent [62]. This is a particular overreach and harm for queer people, for whom experiences of being forcibly and incorrectly labeled permeate daily life and are a major source of discomfort, indignity, and oppression [27]. While they did receive some relevant or interesting ads, our participants provided myriad examples of ad platforms misgendering, mislabelling, and misunderstanding them due to their queerness. Their concerns also extended to privacy and surveillance, with the universal feeling of creepiness heightened for many by the risks and dangers they face in the real world.

These struggles might resonate with a wide variety of queer and other people alike. But due to their sociocultural positioning, our interviewees were particularly well-equipped to consider resistance and alternatives. *Queer self-determination* describes the process of willfully rejecting externally-imposed labels, opting out of cisheteropatriarchal roles and expectations, and disentangling individual value from compliance with normativity [48]. Despite the power dynamics that currently prevent end users from resisting ad platforms’ problematic ad content or harmful inferences, participants widely described their desires for targeted ads in these terms. As P2 summarized, “if [Instagram’s ad platform] just pulled that I selected ‘female’ [when I set up my profile], that feels less invasive than if it’s from my browsing data—of course, they’re going to do both, but it feels better if I provided the information” (P2).

## 5.3 Enabling Refusal in—and of—Advertising Systems

Until this point, we have remained in the realm of what P14 termed “the assumption that [people] must live with ads.” But a final major theme we heard from participants was their desire to opt out of targeted advertising entirely (see Section 4.3.3). We understand this overwhelming instinct among our queer participants as a form of *refusal*. The wide range of critical theories that can be called feminist are unified by their fundamental premise that the violence experienced by marginalized individuals and communities is neither natural nor inevitable. In refusing to internalize or accept cisheteropatriarchy, feminist theories imagine new futures via the interrogation and rejection of violent norms. This collective rejection, which is generative in its group solidarity and insistence on a different status quo, is termed a *politics of refusal* [14, 51].

Formalizing a feminist postcolonial bioethics, racial justice scholar Ruha Benjamin [6] suggests that *informed consent* has a rarely reflected-upon corollary: *informed refusal*. Extending this theory from the realm of biomedical data to targeted advertising systems, our findings suggest that, in this context too, individuals must be given the option to opt into and out of data collection and inference. Informed refusal is but “one part of a larger justice-oriented approach to science and technology” [6]. Balancing the power dynamics that exist between end users and advertising systems requires not only enabling refusal at the individual level, but fundamentally disrupting the norms of surveillance and categorization. P4 imagined a model for targeted advertising shaped by refusal, which would provide people with greater control of their online ad experiences, as well as the ability to opt out:

It definitely has to be based in opting in. I think the default should be that people opt out, and every website should be very transparent, and give people options and explanations about what kind of information they want. [...] There should be consent, and people should have an option to opt out and still use the platform for free—I don’t really consider it a choice if it’s like, you have to agree to [targeted ads] or you can’t use [the platform]. (P4)

Despite its popularity among our interviewees, at present, refusal is not a viable option for (dis)engaging with targeted advertising. Policies and legislation like Do Not Track and the European Union’s GDPR legislation are beginning to provide processes and rights towards this end, but in practice, ad platforms ignore the former and are only beginning to suffer legal consequences from the latter (which only apply to European Union member states) [32, 58]. No major ad platform provides the option to refuse targeted advertising altogether, nor do they have any current obligation to do so.

Instead of allowing users to opt out, platforms like Instagram and Google are at best beginning to offer users the ability to view (but usually not edit) the inferences made about their interests [34]. Similarly, platforms like Facebook allow users to self-identify their gender identity from a long list of options [20, 25]. However, only binary options (plus “Not Specified” or “Unknown”) are offered to advertisers targeting those same users, suggesting that these companies are making binary-categorizing inferences within their ad platforms [25, 45].



Refusal understands that these offerings are fundamentally insufficient, as will be any options offered while platforms still conscript their users into serving their lucrative ad targeting businesses. Any form of consent that does not operate “with an expectation that individuals may very well decline participation” [6] cannot adequately respect individual autonomy. Ultimately, the harms of targeted advertising cannot be addressed without a deep reckoning among online platforms about the commodification of personal user information, and a subsequent shift to a business model that does not presume (and fundamentally rely upon) non-consensual acquiescence from the vast majority of users.

#### 5.4 Limitations and Future Work

We present this work as a step forward in understanding the experiences of users marginalized by society and by sociotechnical systems, and their experiences at those margins; however, there still remain limitations and myriad directions for future work.

*Limitations.* Ad targeting is a powerful sociotechnical system: a multi-billion dollar industry that is nearly impossible to avoid and with which individuals interact nearly constantly online. However, it is but one such system, and while our findings may generalize to some extent, we look forward to further research examining similar themes elsewhere.

As we have emphasized throughout this paper, despite being a minority, the queer community is far from a monolith. While our sample of participants had significant variation along many axes (e.g., race, gender, transgender identity), most participants were from a similar age group, and the majority were still American. We encourage further work that examines similar topics with an eye to understanding the impact of different age groups, life stages, ethnic cultures, and other attributes of individual and group experiences.

*Future Work.* Our contributions raise as many new questions as they answer. What does genuine content look like in the context of targeted online ads, or is the format itself inherently unable to garner trust for some individuals and groups? What might it look like to design online systems, advertising or otherwise, that prioritize users’ self-determined labels, directly request user feedback and validation, or compensate them for using their data? Even under the current regime of extraction and inference, what tools might empower people—perhaps by allowing them to audit the ad targeting algorithms that act on them or supporting their right to refusal? And what steps should policymakers and governing entities take to recognize and sanction ad platforms for harms caused, and hold them to account moving forward? We look forward to future work in pursuit of answers to these questions.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This work presents a qualitative interview study of the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in relation to targeted advertising systems and platforms, analyzing their experiences using concepts from queer and feminist theory. Our results show that participants’ negative experiences with targeted advertising occur at three different levels.

First, at the level of the content itself: participants reported frustration with stereotypical and tokenizing depictions of queerness in ad content, and expressed desire for content that represents themselves and their communities more accurately. We analyze

participants’ responses on this level through the lens of *homonormativity*, a concept from queer theory describing the pressure—reproduced within LGBTQ+ cultures and communities—to adhere to heterosexual society’s ideals.

But this desire for more representative ad content occurred in a dialectic with participants’ more fundamental distrust of the overreaching, invasive nature of ad targeting systems. On this second level, they reported concern about surveillance and privacy with respect to the constant collection of their personal data, and the ways ads themselves can leak one’s identity information to anyone else who happens to see them. Participants felt uncomfortable—at best unseen and at worst endangered—with the inferences they believed these systems to be making and reflecting back at them. Imagining possibilities to address these concerns, participants described wanting greater control over the categories they were placed in and the ads they saw—a desire we connect with queer practices of self-determination.

Throughout our interviews, many participants said they try to avoid ads entirely, although the ubiquity of targeted advertising makes this nearly impossible. On this third and final level, we call attention to many participants’ desire to opt out entirely. We situate this instinct in feminist theories of refusal, and the idea that refusal itself is generative, articulating a vision for the future. Thanks to queer cultural attention to issues like representation, privacy, and surveillance, as well as queer people’s experience of life at (or outside) the margins of society’s norms, queer people like our participants are uniquely situated to give insights into algorithmic systems that extract data and make automated inferences about them. By understanding their perspectives, we can better articulate the harms such systems cause, and envision better futures.

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## A APPENDIX

### A.1 Interview Guide

Each interview began with introducing ourselves as researchers and explaining the purpose of the study—to understand participants' experiences with online advertising. Following that, we outlined the three parts of the interview. The first part reserved 5 minutes to discuss their experiences with online advertising in general. The second part consisted of 15 minutes of questions about online advertising as it relates to identity. The third and final part dedicated 15 minutes to discuss online advertising as an LGBTQ+ individual. We finished every interview with open-ended demographics questions. We detail each part of the semi-structured interview below.

*Part 1: Online advertising.* As part of the study, we sought to understand how and why participants engaged with ads they considered compelling. In addition to reflecting on how often they interact with ads, participants were asked to recall an ad they had recently interacted with and reflect on the characteristics. These questions provided the foundation for a deeper understanding of how participants personally identify with ads as queer individuals.

- (1) How often do you come across online advertising? On what platforms?
- (2) What kind of ads do you see frequently? Are there any particular types of products, types of imagery, or other themes you come across often?
- (3) What makes an ad effective to you? (Can you think of any ads you've clicked on lately?)
  - (a) What about this ad made it memorable to you? Why did you click on them?
  - (b) What features of the ads catch your attention most (the text or the imagery used)?
  - (c) How often do you engage with the ads you're shown?

*Part 2: Ad targeting.* Next, we wanted participants to consider what assumptions they believe advertising platforms may be making about their interests and identities, and what the basis for these assumptions may be. We asked participants to reflect on the kinds of themes, people, and other imagery they usually see in their targeted ads and speculate as to why they received that content. We also explored the relationship of such content with multiple aspects of their identities, asking about feelings of misrepresentation and whether or not they wanted these identity aspects to be represented and/or inferred by ad targeting systems.

- (4) Why do you think you receive these kinds of ads (or the ad you mentioned previously in particular, for example)?
  - (a) What do you think advertising platforms are assuming about you (e.g., about your interests, identity, etc.)?
  - (b) What do you think those assumptions are based on?
- (5) When advertising systems make those assumptions about you, what aspects of your identity do you think this kind of ad targeting gets right?
- (6) What aspects of your identity do you feel are overlooked or wrongly represented in online ads?
- (7) How do you identify (in whatever words you'd like to describe it)?
- (8) What kinds of people do you see represented in these ads? Do you feel represented in these ads?

- (a) As an LGBTQ+ person?
- (b) In other aspects of your identity?
- (9) Would you like to feel more represented in the ads you see?
  - (a) What aspects of your identity would you like to see represented? What would that look like?
  - (b) What aspects of your identity would you not want to have represented in ads you're shown, if any?
  - (c) How would you like this kind of representation to happen? Would you like these things to be inferred, or explicitly opt-in (or something else)?

*Part 3: Targeted ads and LGBTQ+ identity.* In our final set of interview questions we explored participants' perceptions of positive and negative impacts on LGBTQ+ people and communities. In relation to negative impacts, we asked further questions about participants' knowledge and use of strategies for avoiding ad targeting, as well as what they would like to see changed (including more realistic and more speculative ideas).

- (10) Imagine you saw an ad that made you feel/not feel represented. What would your immediate reaction be? How would it affect your attitude towards the product? Towards yourself?
- (11) Thinking about your experience as an [LGBTQ] person, how do you feel these ads affect you (both positively and negatively)?
  - (a) Do you feel like problematic ads' negative effects are mostly due to the way you're being targeted, the actual content in the ad itself, some combination of the two, or something else entirely?
- (12) Have you heard other queer people talk about their (negative/positive) experiences with online advertising?
  - (a) What kinds of experiences have you heard about?
- (13) How do you think online advertising impacts the queer community in general?
- (14) What would you change about online advertising as a queer person?
- (15) How often do you see ads offline (for instance, in magazines or on billboards)?
  - (a) Where do you see them?
  - (b) Are they different from the ones you see online? If so, how?
  - (c) (If there's a difference) Do you prefer one type over the other?
- (16) Do you use any strategies for avoiding online ads, like ad blockers or avoiding certain websites or social media platforms? If so, what are those strategies?
  - (a) Why do you use them? Are they effective?
- (17) What is your age and how would you describe your gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality?