



# Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

## Rainbowwashing: Does it Impact Purchase Intention?

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**ABSTRACT**

Cause related marketing efforts by multiple brands have grown over the past few years. With the growth of social media and even more awareness for multiple causes, consumers are pickier when it comes to brands that supports them. While many studies have been done when it comes to “greenwashing” (the tactics of brands to show their green initiatives), there are still more that needs to be done to understand the impact of “rainbowashing” marketing methods on consumer purchase intention. The importance of this study and how it can affect businesses are discussed. To get a feel for the potential effect of this phenomenon of marketing, I utilized an experimental vignette methodology to test the effects of rainbowashing on consumer purchase intentions. The advertisements consisted of two different types of services, four different brands, and eight total versions of the advertisement, with some having a “rainbowashed” logo and some without. Participants were randomly assigned one of the eight vignettes and, after viewing the advertisement participants were asked to rate their feelings about the advertisement, their support, and ultimately purchase intention.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Marketers have long used Cause-related Marketing tactics to gain media attention from certain demographics and to show their support for a certain cause. This action taken by companies used to be a voluntary action but has grown to become a mandatory investment to continue the support of customers (Varadarajan & Menon 1988; Stroup & Neubert 1987). As time went on, new movements started to erupt and cause companies to market themselves in a different way. An example of this can be seen with the LGBTQ+ rights movement and their visual sign of resistance, which first uses the rainbow flags to describe the queer community as a whole and different other flags with different color schemes to highlight individual identities within the spectrum. With this unforgettable and recognizable visual, companies have decided to use said visuals to show their support to the world, especially during PRIDE month in June. However, once the month of June comes to a halt, all support for the LGBTQ+ community disappears, like it never happened. Does this show of support and quick turnaround increase purchase intention of queer and straight consumers or does it not matter to consumers at all?

To get a feel for the potential effect of this phenomenon of marketing, I utilized an experimental vignette methodology to test the effects of rainbowwashing on consumer purchase intentions. The advertisements consisted of two different types of services, four different brands, and eight total versions of the advertisement, with some having a “rainbowashed” logo and some without. Participants were randomly assigned one of the eight vignettes and, after viewing the advertisement participants were asked to rate their feelings about the advertisement, their support, and ultimately purchase intention.

With the growth of activism and social media, cause related marketing is even more important than ever. With this growth of reach and want for corporate responsibility, consumers can hold multiple brands in a higher standard to gain necessary sales. Social media’s growth also allowed many consumers to voice their opinions when it comes to brands and their strategies to show support of causes. Over the years, with more movements coming to light, brands are becoming even more active with their activism. This current tide of activism meant more rainbow items to sell, limited edition rainbow everything, and even more rainbow branding, to

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the point where companies are changing their logos to be rainbow-fied. While this is one way to show support for the LGBTQ+ community, many consumers have caught on that changing logos are not enough, that more action must be taken by companies. To show companies that consumers are not tolerating their performative activism tactics, people have made multiple memes (humorous videos that spread quickly throughout social media) to show fellow consumers of brands and their disingenuous marketing tactics. With this consumer awareness for brands and their rainbowwashing tactics, will it impact their intent of purchase from that brand?

According to a study conducted by service comparison provider Uswitch, Americans have spent around 1,300 hours on social media in 2021 (Hiley, 2021). With the pandemic forcing everything to go digital, consumers are more attached to their screens than ever before. With this amount of screen time, consumers are exposed to multiple advertisements in one day. Let us say a consumer is scrolling through Instagram and sees an advertisement for McDonalds with a rainbowwashed logo, this person may be more welcoming to the thought of McDonald's showing support but may question its motives. However, if this person sees a rainbowwashed advertisement for a Hilton hotel, while they may like to see the rainbow logo, they may question this advertisement even more, due to hotels being more of a private service than a public service such as a restaurant. However, did the rainbowwashed logos, still affect their purchase intention? How would they have reacted if they knew that a company is openly homophobic? How would they have reacted if the advertisements were not rainbowwashed. According to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialist and Author Lily Zheng, "Ultimately, companies that are far from inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ people have no right to market themselves and their products to our community. The rainbow logos are fragile façades of inclusivity hiding persistent inequality — and the truth will become clear sooner or later" (Zheng, 2021). Companies, even those who invest in politicians who are clearly homophobic, such as AT&T, love to rainbowwash their marketing efforts in the month of June because it makes them look good, but aside from communications, they are also purveyors of the continuous injustice that the LGBTQ+ community is still facing today. Another example can be seen with the infamous Marks & Spencer LGBT (Lettuce, Guacamole, Bacon, Tomato) Limited Edition Pride Sandwich. While the thought counts, the efforts continue to

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cover the inequalities and injustice that the community is facing. Some companies, however, include donations with the purchase of their rainbow goods, such as Hollister donating up to \$100,000 to the Trevor Project, a charity that provides hotlines for LGBTQ+ youth who may need them and Apple who sells a limited edition watch band with proceeds going to advocacy groups.

Therefore, this is an important matter and research. Do “rainbowwashed” marketing tactics affect consumers and increase their purchase intention? Or do consumers simply do not care about rainbow logos, and can they put their marketing money into more meaningful investments that will help this community instead? This study was created to answer those questions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Cause Marketing and Brand Genuineness**

Cause Related Marketing is defined as marketing that involves profit-motivated giving and enables firms to contribute to nonprofit organizations while also increasing their bottom line by tying those contributions to sales (Grau and Folse 2007; Dean 2004; Varadarajan and Menon 1988). Throughout the years, Cause Related Marketing tactics have been used to generate buzz and goodwill for the brand, but to also earn profits. Cause Related Marketing has been powerful and effective because firms tend to promise contributions towards a certain cause, but they use the profits that they earn from the campaign to make that contribution. Due to our ever-changing societal norms, it is imperative for brands to add social responsibility to their priorities list. Brands are now being held accountable not just for their product or service, but also their stances on various political issues that affects society (Snyder, 2015). Therefore, the behavior of the consumer drives profits and then gives the companies room to donate to causes (Grau and Folse, 2007). With our ever-changing societal norms, it may be a positive thing to see various brands support the causes that their consumers either care about or issues that they experience. With the oversaturation of brands and support in the market, sometimes it can be hard to figure out who actually cares or who just wants people to think that they care. While some actually take an active role in advocacy, there are

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those who engage in prosocial behaviors and activities to be regarded as favorable by others (Berman, Levine, Barasch, and Small, 2015; Bénabou and Tirole 2010; Ellingsen and Johannesson 2011; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2011; Harbaugh 1998a, b; Lacatera and Macis 2010). All of this work that brands put into their cause-related campaigns are effective in improving their image because it does not just help add value but working with a certain cause can also become a part of a brand's identity and culture (Wymer and Samu, 2008; Polonsky and Wood, 2001; Pringle and Thompson, 2001).

#### “Good-Washing” in Advertising

“Good-Washing” in advertising is not a new thing. This term and idea were first coined by Environmentalist Jay Westervald in the 1980's (Watson, 2016). While some consumers support brands and their use of “good-washing” in their marketing tactics, many are usually unaware of the ulterior motives that many companies have. While consumers are being blinded by the green logos to support the environment or rainbows to support the LGBTQ+ community “some cautioned that the degree to which brands are pursuing purposeful marketing — and the reasons they're doing so — is symptomatic of a particularly misguided and media-hungry moment for the business” (Watson, 2019). Supporting causes for media moments will cause some bad-will towards a certain brand, if they are only supporting causes to look better, while they are some of the worst offenders when it comes to the cause that they are openly and loudly supporting (Laufer, 2003). In order for brands to be able to continue their ‘goodwashing’ tactics, radical transparency about their initiatives and third-party certification can be tools that can show their authenticity (Stoddard, 2018).

#### Stereotyping in Advertising

No matter how more progressive society gets, stereotypes still exist and emerge. Stereotypes influence the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions and interactions of persons who hold the stereotype (Heydarian, Castro, & Morera, 2022). Commonly known as prejudice and discrimination, these actions are widely regarded as contributors to disparities in educational, employment (Fischer, 2010; Frankowski, 2017; Silverman & Cohen, 2014), and health (Donovan & West, 2015; Dovidio & Fiske, 2012; Ojeda-Leitner & Lewis, 2019; Stewart et al., 2012) outcomes among the groups toward which they are targeted. By making stereotypes

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prevalent and be portrayed in a certain advertisement, it can bring about a certain reaction for many groups of consumers. Consumers can either accept the stereotype, reject the stereotype, be indifferent, or may even feel cast out, the spectrum a consumer can feel is broad.

Depending on the product, how the advertisement is portraying how the product is used, and even down to the imagery or body language that is being portrayed can affect multiple people differently. For example, if a man was to view a shaving razor ad, those who are heterosexual and are masculine may accept the tropes because they relate. Meanwhile, a heterosexual man may either react positively if they are more masculine or may look for a different brand if they are more feminine in their gender expression. Meanwhile, a man who is homosexual may support an advertisement for a moisturizer more than those who are heterosexual and/or more masculine. Individuals and how they view sexuality can affect the way they react to an advertisement, but this reaction can only occur if the advertisement is either towards or going against the stereotypes of their identities (Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2011).

With all of this in mind, the brands and types of companies that are being shown in the advertisements in this study, will affect the participants' reactions and purchase intention. We have studied two different types of service providers for this study, restaurants, and hotels. We have chosen to study restaurants because they are typically a public service. Public service providers meaning that a user's identity will not be able to be connected to their use of the service or not. For our restaurants, we have chosen a lower end brand, McDonalds, and a higher end brand. The Capital Grille. Our other service providers are hotels. Hotels are more of a private service, meaning that if one chooses to stay at a hotel that is loud about their support for the LGBTQ+ community, one can make stereotypes about that user because it is a more involved service than a restaurant. The two brands that we have chosen to study are Hilton and Super 8 Motels.

*Hypothesis 1a: For downscale brands having rainbow, restaurants will generate more positive towards recommendation*

*H 1b: For downscale brands, a rainbow will generate more negative attitudes towards recommendations for hotels*

*H2: For upscale brand rainbow will have no effect on recommendation likelihood*



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### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Participants and Design

We used a 2 (brand status: upscale vs. downscale brand) x 2 (rainbow log: rainbow vs. no-rainbow themed logo) x 2 (product type: restaurant vs. hotel) between-subjects design.

Participating in exchange for course credit were 345 total 307 undergraduate students and 38 from general public (175 men, 169 women, 1 other; 19 to 87 years-old from a northeastern university in the United States (66.3% men; 19 to 21 years-old [ $M = 19.46$ ,  $SD = .58$ ]).

#### Manipulation

- *Brand Status.* Participants in the upscale brand condition viewed ads for the Capital Grille and Hilton. Participants in the downscale brand condition viewed ads for McDonald's and Super 8 Motels.
- *Rainbow Themed Logo.* The ads with a rainbow themed logo had their logos edited to show a rainbow gradient instead of their usual colors. The ads without the rainbow themed logo only saw the logos as they normally would.
- *Product Type.* Restaurant versus Hotel. The restaurant ads consisted of images of food such as burger and fries for McDonalds and steak for The Capital Grille. The hotel ads consisted images of the exteriors of hotels. All eight stimulus ads appear in (Appendix A).

#### Procedure and Measures

Participants were able to take the survey from their own devices through a customized link. The survey first started with a consent form. After the consent form, participants were given 15 seconds to view a version of the flier ad that was randomly selected out of the 8 versions. Participants were then asked to range their sentiments in terms of how likely they are to recommend the brand to other people. Some of the questions in the survey included, "How likely are you to ***recommend*** viewing this ad to your friends and family" and "How likely are you to ***consider purchasing services*** from this brand in the future?". Under these questions, participants had to answer the question using a 7-point Likert Scale that had words ranging from "Unlikely" and "Improbable" on the far left and words like "Likely" and "Probable" on

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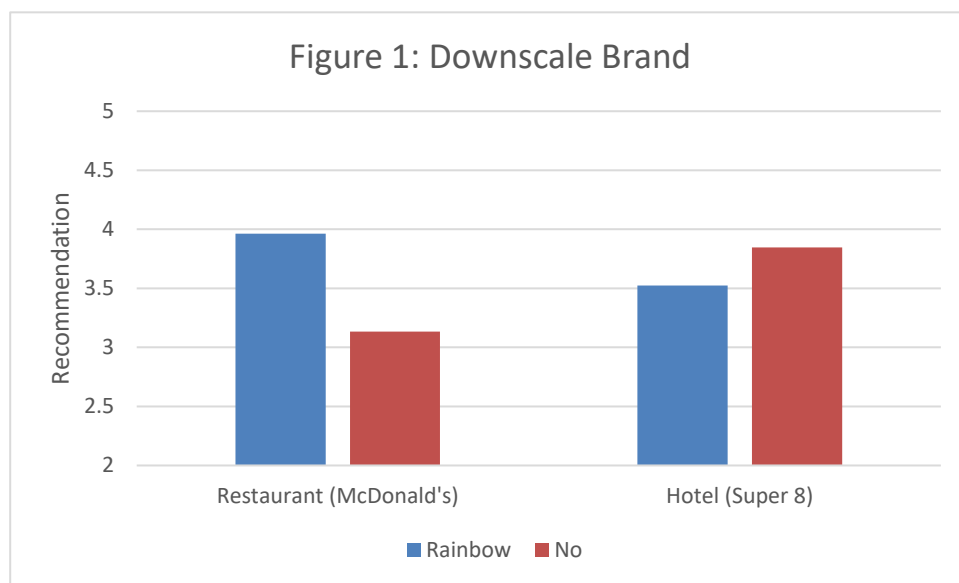
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the far right. In the last part of the survey, participants were asked to give demographic information such as region of the country they are in, age, gender, and sexual orientation.

### **RESULTS**

We performed a 2 (brand status: upscale vs. downscale brand) x 2 (rainbow logo: rainbow vs. no-rainbow themed logo) x 2 (product type: restaurant vs. hotel) ANOVA on the recommendation likelihood. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of brand status ( $M_{upscale} = 4.58$  vs.  $M_{downscale} = 3.87$ ;  $F(1, 337) = 14.53, p < .01$ ) but no main effects of rainbow logo ( $F(1, 337) = .25, p = \text{n.s.}$ ) or product type ( $F(1, 337) = .89, p = \text{n.s.}$ ). A marginally significant two-way interaction effects was found for the brand status x product type ( $F(1, 337) = .281, p = .09$ ), whereas the other two two-way interaction effects were not significant: i.e., brand status x rainbow logo ( $F(1, 337) = .73, p = .39$ ); rainbow logo x product type ( $F(1, 337) = 1.97, p = .16$ ).

Relevant to our hypotheses, we observed a marginally significant three-way interaction of brand status, rainbow logo, and product type on recycling attitudes ( $F(1, 337) = 2.83, p = .09$ ).



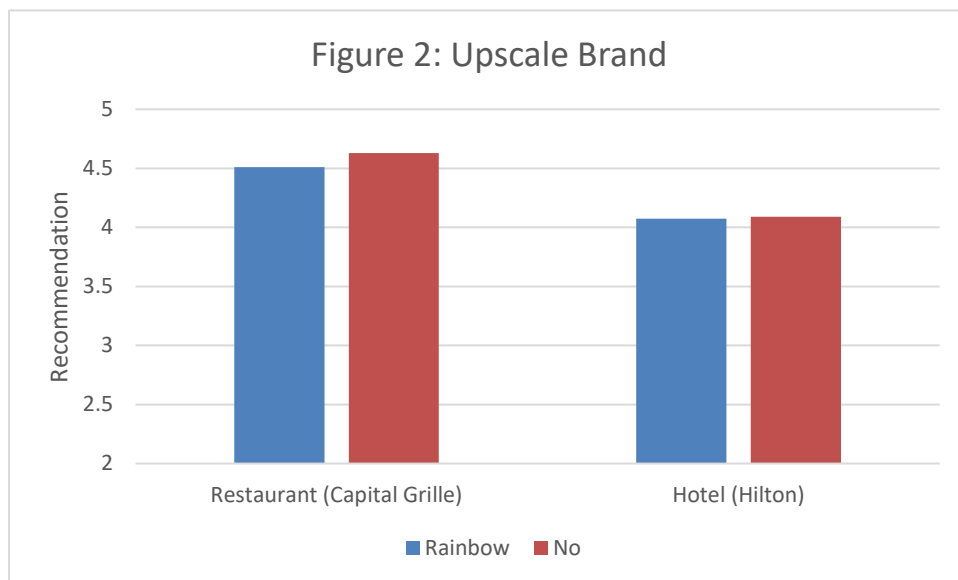
*Figure 1: Downscale Brands and Brand Recommendations*

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To better understand the nature of the three-way interaction, we split the data by brand status and examined the rainbow logo x product type two-way interaction for upscale and downscale brands separately. As shown in Figure 1, for downscale brands, the results showed a significant two-way interaction between product type and rainbow logo ( $F(1, 170) = 5.09, p = .02$ ). Simple effect analysis showed that participants are *more* likely to recommend a restaurant brand if the logo has a rainbow theme ( $M_{rainbow} = 3.96$  vs.  $M_{no\ rainbow} = 3.13; t(87) = 2.24, p = .02$ ); however, although non-significant, participants are *less* likely to recommend a hotel brand if the logo has a rainbow theme ( $M_{rainbow} = 3.52$  vs.  $M_{no\ rainbow} = 3.84; t(83) = -.91, p = .36$ ).



*Figure 2: Upscale Brands and Brand Recommendation*

In contrast, as shown in Figure 2, for upscale brands, a two-way interaction was not significant between product type and rainbow logo ( $F(1, 171) = .03, p = .84$ ). A main effect for product type was marginally significant in that participants are more likely to recommend a restaurant than a hotel ( $M_{restaurant} = 4.2$  vs.  $M_{hotel} = 3.69, F(1, 171) = 3.22, p = .07$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

### Conclusion

The study has shown that when it comes to the brand statuses that there were more meaningful results and interactions. This means that to consumers, what matters more is the status of the brand and whether it is upscale or downscale. There is more interaction when it came with upscale brands because it is what helps set the consumer apart. The image that a consumer is portraying by going to a certain restaurant or hotel is more important than whether the company supports the LGBTQ+ community or not.

However, if we look closer at the results, we can see that within downscale brands, it is more favorable for a public service provider such as a restaurant and more specifically, McDonalds to have a rainbowwashed ad, but for Super8 it is less favorable. This correlates with the idea that when it comes to brands that is very public and a consumer's use will not affect their identity and image, rainbow ads are favored. However, for a private service provider such as a motel, an ad with no rainbow is more favored.

In the upscale results, it is shown that higher end brands are more favored by consumers because it helps them to show a certain image towards society. Looking closer at the data, there is not much difference on preference whether a high-end brand supports the LGBTQ+ community or not. However, more closely, the data has shown that ads with no rainbow are just a bit more favored than ads with a rainbow when it came to upscale brands.

### General Discussion

The study conducted in this article is novel. While many have studied other types of "Good-washing", the focus on rainbowwashing and logos have not been closely looked at. When this study was conducted, there was many limitations that were present. One of the major limitations was the study pool. While some data did come from those in the general population, most of the data came from college students who may have the same values, beliefs, and opinions. Bryant University is also a small campus and is a predominantly white institution, this could have also affected the outcome of the data that we have collected.

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Another limitation that we had in this study was the type of products that we have used. Our study focused on service providers instead of a complete goods company. There are still more studies that can be done by changing multiple variables in the advertisements.

#### Limitations

For future studies, there are many factors to consider. One of the main implications are the products and brands used. A future study could look at solely goods companies, while some can look at hybrids, some can look at a different type of service and so many more. Another factor to consider is the sample size and sample diversity. This study can be done in a national and even global scale. With this, results come from a diverse group of participants who all have different opinions of certain brands, brand image, and LGBTQ+ community support.

#### Implications

In this article, we have taken a closer look at one specific type of a “good-washing” marketing tactic that focuses on the LGBTQ+ community. While other research has looked at stereotypes and portrayals of the actors in advertisements, there has not been one that focused on the performative activism of rainbowwashed logos. This study all started out because of a certain meme that circulates around the month of June and July (Link in Appendix B). The meme shows brands that have changed their Instagram profile pictures into rainbowwashed logos of their companies, then when the clock strike 12:00AM on July 1<sup>st</sup>, companies have switched back to their original profile picture logos. While this meme was made for comedic purposes, it does show an underlying problem of brands and performative activism. Some of the brands that were shown who participated in rainbowwashing efforts was even caught by the community as investors for the campaigns of out and proud homophobic politicians. This article is only part of the string that is “Good-Washing” in marketing. Next to ideas such as greenwashing, rainbowwashing is one that has been caught by the activists who are a part of or support the LGBTQ+ community.

Brands can benefit from this study by taking a closer look at their cause-related marketing strategies, but also specifically, the strategy that is targeted towards the LGBTQ+ community. This community has been through a lot of injustice over the course of the world, and it is still facing a lot of hate and inequality to this day. For example, Transgender Women of Color

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are still being murdered at alarming rates, with 2021 being one of the worst years when it comes to crimes against Trans Women of Color and those in the LGBTQ+ community. While it is beautiful to see many brands are ready to support this community, there is so much more work that can be done and should be done. Changing a brand's logo to a rainbowwashed logo only adds to the problem by not acknowledging or not helping the cause at all. At the end of the day, it is more favorable of brands to actively engage with the community by donating to certain advocacy groups, hiring more representative talent, speaking up when hate is being spewed, and so much more. There is more work to be done and it will take more than a rainbow logo to solve the issues that still lingers in society today.

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**APPENDIX**

Appendix A – Ads used in Study

Appendix 1A – High-end restaurant ads used in the study



Figure 1: Rainbow Logo



Figure 2: Regular Logo

Appendix 2A – Low-end restaurant ads used in the study



Figure 1: Rainbow Logo



Figure 2: Regular Logo

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Appendix 3A – Low-end hotel ads used in the study



Figure 1: Rainbow Logo

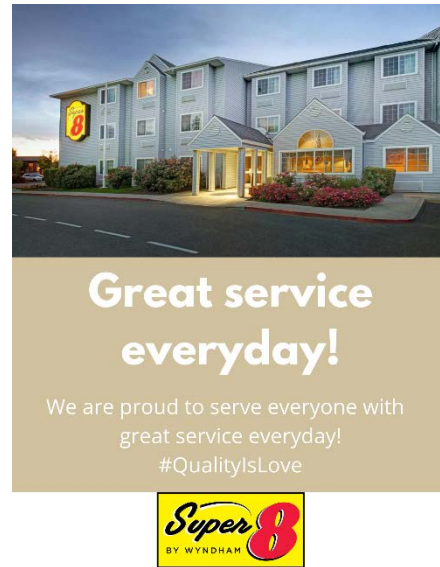


Figure 2: Regular Logo

Appendix 4A – High-end hotel ads used in the study



Figure 1: Rainbow Logo



Figure 2: Normal Logo



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Appendix B – Meme links and photos that inspired the study

Appendix 1B: “Companies after Pride month”

LINK TO VIDEO: <https://youtu.be/z8RzbAOE4gg>

Appendix 2B: Twitter memes about Rainbowwashing by companies



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