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THE EFFECTS OF HOMOSEXUAL IMAGERY IN ADVERTISEMENTS ON BRAND PERCEPTION AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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This study was aimed at examining the effects of homosexual imagery in print advertisements on consumers' perceptions of the brand and intentions to purchase the product. Brand perceptions and purchase intentions were measured before and after participants were exposed to various advertisements including gay, lesbian, and heterosexual imagery. Results indicated that homosexual imagery had a negative effect on brand perceptions and purchase intentions. This effect was mediated by the salience of the homosexual imagery. Further research recommendations are made.

Keywords: homosexual advertisement, gay, lesbian, marketing, brand perception, consumer.

Homosexual imagery is becoming more common in advertisements and in the media in general (Tuten, 2006). Marketing professionals have taken notice of this group of potential consumers for good reason. Estimates by many marketing and academic experts state that gays and lesbians make up between 4% and 8% of the total US population, a group of 11 to 23 million people. To give some perspective on this demographic, it is potentially bigger than the Asian American population that is currently measured at 12 million or 4.2% (Gardyn, 2001).

Just as marketing firms target demographic factors such as race/ethnicity, age, gender, and education, a trend is developing to use sexual orientation as a factor that predicts attitudes and spending patterns (Gardyn, 2001). Several major automobile manufacturers such as Subaru and Ford have tried to tap into this

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potentially lucrative market by designing advertisements targeted specifically at the gay and lesbian population. Several years ago, Ford Motor Company launched a campaign to market its Jaguar brand to gay consumers (Prince, 2003). Manufacturers of other brands of cars such as Volvo, Land Rover, and Volkswagen have also attempted to break into this market by advertising in the gay media (Halliday, 2002). Even Wal-Mart has recently hired a marketing company known for its work in the gay and lesbian consumer market in an attempt to tap into this profitable group ("Wal-Mart after pink dollar", 2006). Overall, it appears that marketers are becoming more interested in selling to the gay and lesbian community (Atkinson, 2003).

However, targeting marketing at homosexual consumers could be perceived as controversial and potentially offensive to the heterosexual consumer. For example, a recent Ford campaign prompted a proposed boycott of Ford products by the American Family Association (Kiley, 2006). While many states were debating whether or not to recognize gay and lesbian marriages, former President George W. Bush declared that "marriage is a sacred institution between a man and a woman" and that he would "work with congressional leaders and others to do what is legally necessary to defend the sanctity of marriage" ("Massachusetts Court rules ban", 2004). In 2007, a Gallup Poll survey found that 50% of Americans would favor a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay and lesbian couples. Also, 38% of those polled felt that homosexuality should be less widely accepted in the United States ("American public opinion", 2007).

With this degree of controversy and strong opinion over the gay and lesbian lifestyle, one might wonder whether it would be a wise decision for a company to specifically target this group of consumers through the use of homosexual imagery in advertisements. It is possible that aligning one's company with this minority group might alienate some of the other 92% of the population.

In the past, when a company has chosen a celebrity spokesperson who later turned out to be controversial, the spokesperson was usually quickly dropped from the advertising campaign. For example, celebrities such as Madonna, Mike Tyson, and Vanessa Williams were all removed from positions as endorsers after public exposure of their involvement in controversial activities (Watkins, 1989). After Kobe Bryant was charged with sexual assault in 2003, many of the companies he endorsed (McDonald's, Coca Cola, and Nike for example) became hesitant about keeping him as their spokesperson for fear of negative consumer reactions ("Advertisers worry", 2003). The avoidance of controversial topics could lead companies to disregard the gay and lesbian market in favor of a more mainstream audience. However, according to marketing executive Bob Witeck, CEO of WiteckCombs Communications, "we are in the business of business, not social policy" (Cribbs, 2003).

Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow (1996, 1998) examined these issues in a study investigating how heterosexuals reacted to portrayals of homosexuals in print advertisements. They predicted that a person's attitude towards homosexuality would interact with advertising imagery to strongly affect emotional response to the advertisement.

The results of these studies indicated that heterosexuals' emotional and attitudinal responses to the advertisements depicting homosexual models were related to their general attitude towards homosexuality. In general, if a person was not very tolerant of homosexuals, there was a stronger negative emotional and attitudinal response to the advertisement itself and towards the brand sponsor.

The current study was conducted to determine how individuals of various sexual orientations and backgrounds would respond to print advertisements depicting homosexual imagery. We hypothesized that heterosexuals' brand perceptions and purchase intentions would be negatively affected by advertisements containing homosexual imagery. We were also interested in conducting exploratory analyses to determine whether or not there were any differences in responses based on gender.

There are four ways in which the current study differs from, and adds to, previous research. First, the participants' willingness to purchase the product at a later date was assessed in this study, an aspect that was not directly measured in the two studies by Bhat et al. (1996, 1998). Although it is interesting to learn about consumer responses to advertisements, marketing professionals are probably more interested in the ultimate effect on consumer spending. Second, in the current study we utilize actual print advertisements for well-known brands instead of fictionalized advertisements created by the researchers. Third, the advertisements used in this research were presented in color, thereby increasing ecological validity. Fourth, this study included not only gay male imagery in the advertising stimuli, but also lesbian imagery.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 127 undergraduate and graduate students in a small southeastern university in the US were recruited during classes and were offered extra credit for completing the survey. Demographic data showed that 74.8% of participants were female and 24.4% were male. Ages ranged from 20 to 60 with 45.7% of respondents aged between 20 and 25. The sample consisted of 63% Caucasian, 26% Black/not Hispanic, 9.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.6% Hispanic. The sample contained a variety of majors including Education, Mathematics, Business, Music, Physical Education, and Psychology. In terms of sexual orientation, 96.9% reported that they were exclusively heterosexual, 0.8% were homosexual, and 2.4% did not respond to this item.

MATERIALS

The first page of the booklets given to the participants contained demographic items regarding gender, age, major area of study, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The second and third pages included general brand attitude and purchase intention questions pertaining to the specific companies featured in the advertisements (Budweiser/Bud Light, Orbitz Travel, Saturn, Bridgestone Tyres, and Visa). The next section contained a set of five print advertisements, each followed by a questionnaire designed to measure reactions to the advertisement. Some participants viewed advertisements that were heterosexual in nature or depicted lesbian models. Other participants viewed advertisements containing imagery that depicted homosexual males. The conditions were arranged this way in order to match brands and style of the advertisements as closely as possible. For example, we wanted to be able to compare a homosexual male version of an advertisement with a lesbian version while keeping all other details as consistent as possible. In addition, we were able to find more homosexual male advertisements that fitted the purpose of the study than lesbian advertisements. The advertisements in each group were matched so that each participant received advertisements for the same products in the same order. A brief questionnaire followed each advertisement and participants were asked to indicate 1) How much do you like this advertisement?, 2) What is the sexual orientation of the people in this advertisement?, and 3) Does this advertisement make you want to purchase the product? Correlations were run to test the degree of relationship between whether an advertisement 1) was perceived as containing homosexual imagery, 2) was liked, and 3) increased the participants' purchase intentions. The last section of the questionnaire repeated the brand attitude and purchase intention sections that preceded the advertisements. These questions were repeated in order to allow us to detect any changes in perceptions of the brands over the course of the experiment.

PROCEDURE

The experimental procedure involved distributing the questionnaires, reading a short introduction about the purpose of the study to the participants, completion of the questionnaire, and dissemination of debriefing materials to participants. The first analysis was an examination of frequency distributions and correlations between these distributions for attitudes about each of the 10 advertisements. Next, *t* tests were conducted to compare attitudes and purchase intentions before and after participants viewed the ads. The final analysis was a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the interaction between advertisement type (gay male or heterosexual/lesbian) and participant gender (male or female). The dependent variables were brand attitudes (how much the participant liked the advertisement) and purchase intentions. Sexual orientation of participants was

not examined because our sample contained less than 1% of participants who had reported their sexual orientation as homosexual.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides detailed information about the frequency distributions. Some of the more interesting findings are that the two advertisements that received the highest ratings for containing homosexual imagery were Orbitz and Budweiser, with 68.8% of participants rating the Orbitz and 59.4% rating the Budweiser advertisements as containing homosexual imagery. Both of these rated very low for both likeability and purchase intention. The Visa heterosexual advertisement and the Budweiser heterosexual advertisements both rated low on homosexual imagery (3.2% and 0%, respectively) and both received high ratings on likeability and intention to purchase.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION FOR ATTITUDES AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

Advertisement	% Rated homosexual	% Liked	% Purchase
Orbitz - Gay male condition	68.8	20.3	7.8
Budweiser - Gay male condition	59.4	17.2	3.1
Saturn - Gay male condition	25	45.3	28.1
VISA - Gay male condition	12.5	68.8	25
Saturn - Lesbian condition	7.9	42.9	15.9
Bridgestone - Gay male condition	7.8	68.8	78.1
Orbitz - Heterosexual condition	6.3	61.9	27
Bridgestone - Lesbian condition	4.8	73	14.3
VISA - Heterosexual condition	3.2	79.3	36.5
Budweiser - Heterosexual condition	0	42.9	19

As predicted, there was a significant correlation between how much the participants liked the advertisement and whether they wanted to purchase the product depicted in the advertisement (Pearson's $r = .588$, $\alpha = .037$). This significant correlation serves as a manipulation check of the advertising stimuli and testing instrument. Brand perceptions were negatively correlated with the presence of homosexual imagery. A significant correlation was found between whether the advertisement was rated by the participants as containing homosexual imagery and whether or not it was liked (Pearson's $r = -.812$, $\alpha = .002$). The correlation between the presence of homosexual imagery and purchase intentions was not significant ($r = -.466$, $\alpha = .087$).

For the heterosexual/lesbian group, no significant differences were found in the responses to the questionnaires before and after exposure to the advertisements. For the group receiving the gay male condition, responses to the four

questions were significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the first and second administration of the attitude survey. These differences were found in questions related to attitude and purchase intentions towards Orbitz travel agency, purchase intentions towards Bridgestone Tyres, and purchase intentions about Visa credit card service. Overall, attitudes were more negative and purchase intentions were lower in this group.

The data indicate that for the first product, Bud/Bud Light, women liked the advertisement less in both conditions than did men but that both men and women had lower opinions of the advertisement in the gay male condition. For the Orbitz Travel Agency advertisement, females were much more affected by the homosexual imagery and liked the gay male advertisement significantly less than the heterosexual version. Men, however, did not show this effect. For the Bridgestone Tyres advertisement, men rated the female version much higher than the male version and females showed a slight preference for the male advertisement. For the Saturn advertisement, women rated highly both the male and female versions, while men were more likely to dislike the male version more. Finally, for the Visa advertisement, both men and women preferred the heterosexual version over the version depicting two men.

DISCUSSION

Overall, it appears that there is some bias, at least in our sample, against advertisements that incorporate male homosexual imagery, but the same bias was not found for lesbian imagery. Further, it seems that the more easily that people are able to identify the models used in the advertisements as being gay or lesbian, the more they dislike the advertisements and do not plan to purchase the products.

Some of the advertisements that were deliberately selected as containing homosexual imagery were not always identified by participants as being homosexual in content. Participants may have rated these advertisements more highly than they would have if more explicit homosexual imagery had been used. Some researchers have stated that this is a strategy that marketers can use deliberately to try to attract the gay/lesbian market while not alienating the remainder of consumers (Branchik, 2002).

In research similar to the present study, Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) and Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee (2008) investigated the effects on consumers of explicit and implicit homosexual imagery in advertisements and found that heterosexuals preferred heterosexual imagery and implicit homosexual imagery over explicit homosexual imagery. Further, their results indicated that heterosexuals preferred lesbian imagery over gay male imagery. Given these

results they suggested that advertisers targeting the gay market use lesbian and/or implicit homosexual imagery, because it serves the purpose of reaching homosexual consumers and reduces the chances of heterosexuals identifying the advertisements as homosexual. We believe that this is a mistake. Implicit imagery may temporarily go undetected by heterosexuals, but eventually such imagery is likely to be identified by the consumer. One can speculate that there could be a backlash from consumers who felt duped by advertisements containing implicit imagery.

It is important to note that this study was conducted using a sample drawn from students at a southeastern university in the United States. This population tends to have a relatively high incidence of adherence to the Christian religion and to be politically conservative. While replication of this study with other populations would be useful in extending the scope of the results of our study, our sample is representative of the population that advertisers should be most concerned with when considering the potential negative impact of using homosexual imagery.

We found that heterosexual participants reacted negatively to print advertisements containing male homosexual imagery. Since companies would benefit from appealing to individuals of all sexual orientations, it would be wise to find a way to address this issue. This could be an area for investigation in future studies.

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