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The Effect of Gay Identity, Gender, and Gay Imagery on Gay Consumers' Attitude Towards Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background

Despite the vast amount of attention that has been paid to the gay market in the popular press, there appear to be few attempts to apply what is theoretically known about gay consumers to the development of effective advertising strategies to target this group. Advertising research based on Identity Theory has suggested that consumers respond best to advertising that provides content that reflects the consumer's identity (Jaffe, 1991). However, to date, marketers' have primarily used a single notion of gay identity in their advertising. In a content analysis of advertising in gay and lesbian media, Oakenfull and Greenlee (working paper) found that most advertising targeting gay consumers tends to use a depiction of intimacy between two members of the same sex, usually male, to communicate its fit with gay consumers. If identity theory is correct, this limited view of gay identity has the potential to miss the mark for many gay consumers who identify themselves beyond just their sexual orientation.

Past research on subcultures and social movements suggests that gays represent a distinct subculture, rather than just a consumer segment within the main culture (Fugate, 1993; Peñaloza 1996; Bhat, 1996). Accordingly, gay consumers may differ in the degree to which they identify with gay group norms and values (Hebdige, 1979; Leigh et al. 1987; Williams and Qualls 1989; Shouten and McAlexander 1995; Kates 2002). Additionally, the gay identity is one of several identities incorporated into a person's self-concept. Feminist theorists have shown significant gender differences in the way gay individuals identify as gay, such that an individual with a strongly held gay male identity may identify with different advertising imagery than an individual with a strongly held lesbian identity (Ponse, 1978; Rich, 1980; Rust, 1992).

The present research draws from literature in psychology and sociology, relating to gay identity, and feminist theory to consider the effect of gay identity and gender on gays' and lesbians' attitudes towards various types of advertising content most commonly used to target gay consumers. As such, this study empirically tests whether gay males' and lesbians' responses to gay-oriented advertising content is moderated by individual characteristics: (i) the degree to which they identify as gay, and (ii) their sex, and by the explicitness and gender of the gay-oriented advertising imagery.

Procedure

A snowball sampling procedure yielded self-identified gays and lesbians in five geographic regions of the United States. Participants in the study included 68 self-identified gay males and 44 self-identified lesbians from five geographic regions of the United States. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 68 years old with a mean age of 34 years old. Each participant was presented with all of three advertising stimuli, depicting implicit gay imagery, explicit gay male imagery or explicit lesbian imagery. Participants were asked to review each advertisement in the randomized order presented and to answer a three-item attitude toward the advertisement (good/bad, like/dislike, favorable/unfavorable) measure accompanying each advertisement. Level of gay identity was mea-

sured using a modification of Vanable et al's (1994) *Identification and Involvement with the Gay Community* scale.

Results

The results of the study are consistent with the theoretical perspectives offered and advance prior research in an important direction. Simply grouping gay and lesbian consumers of all types into a single market defies traditional segmentation practices by ignoring individual differences among members of the group that may affect responses to marketing actions (Bhat, 1996). A three way interaction effect of sex, gay identity and ad content on attitude towards the ad was found which was driven by both gender and gay identity effects for the ads that featured gay male imagery and implicit gay imagery. These ads appeared to tap into the difference in the way males and females identify as gay (Ponse, 1978; Rich, 1980; Eliason, 1996), which is closely tied to how they *experience* gayness (Warren, 1974). These gender differences are moderated by an individual's level of gay identity, such that the more strongly an individual identifies as gay, the more salient the effect of gender becomes on responses to gay-oriented ad imagery.

From a managerial perspective, clearly the current practice of using a predominance of gay male imagery in advertising to gay consumers provides an effective means of targeting gay males, especially those who are highly identified as gay. However, such a practice is likely to alienate lesbians, who fail to identify with both the gender of the couple in the ad and the sexual nature of the imagery. Despite, this need for lesbian-oriented ad imagery, a content analysis of advertising in *The Advocate*, one of the leading gay and lesbian magazines with a circulation of 88,000, found that lesbian targeted imagery accounted for only three percent of advertising content in 1999 (Oakenfull and Greenlee, working paper). However, lesbian readers of gay and lesbian media represent a niche that appears to be demographically attractive. According to a survey by *Girlfriends*, a lesbian magazine with a circulation of 32,000, its readers have a median household income of \$47,700, with 54% having professional or managerial jobs, 77% having college degrees, 57% having partners, and 22% having children (Alsop, 1999).

Hence, markets that attempt to tap into this market must be aware of the impact of gender on the gay identity. While depictions of lesbian couples that mimic gay male advertising imagery will appeal to lesbians who do not hold a strong gay identity, highly identified lesbians consider this type of advertising to be no more desirable than explicit gay male imagery. The use of implicit gay imagery, in the form of gay symbolism that represents the socio-political nature of lesbian identity should be utilized to target all lesbians. Additionally, it is as effective in targeting low identity gay males as is explicit gay male imagery.

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