The Effect of Cross-Group Contact on Consumer Response to Advertisements

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Research based on the contact hypotheses demonstrates that cross-group contact leads people to have more favorable attitudes towards members of other groups. We examine whether cross-group contact influences consumer response to advertisements and explore moderating factors via a field experiment conducted in South Africa. Results suggest that increased cross-group contact can prompt either positive or negative attitudes towards advertisements and brands depending upon the particular group membership of the subject and/or advertising spokesperson. Results also suggest that this main effect is driven by cross-group identification. Findings contribute to our understanding of how social dynamics influence consumer response to marketing efforts.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Research based on the contact hypotheses (Allport, 1954; Foster & Finchilescu, 1986) demonstrates that cross-group contact, e.g. the extent of contact a consumer has with members of other groups, can lead people to have more favorable attitudes towards members of another group. The fundamental idea is that cross-group contact provides people with the opportunity to discover that they share the same basic values and attitudes (Mynhardt, 1991). The influence of cross-group contact as a source of attitude change is well established in the social psychological literature.

Cross-group contact is also a feature of contemporary marketplaces, most with increasing socio-cultural diversity. As a result, cross-group contact is potentially important to consumer research as an influence on consumer response to advertising and other marketing strategies. And cross-group contact, unlike some social-contextual factors, can be influenced through marketing strategies. Some communication scholars have recently suggested that mediated contact may influence attitudes towards specific groups (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). However, no research has examined cross-group contact as a factor in consumer persuasion or response.

In this research we examine whether cross-group contact influences consumer response to advertisements featuring individuals of different races. The basic hypothesis is that because contact can increase “liking” for a group it may also influence responses to targeted advertisements. The fundamental idea is that cross-group contact provides people with the opportunity to discover that they share the same basic values and attitudes (Mynhardt, 1991). The influence of cross-group contact as a source of attitude change is well established in the social psychological literature.

Further, South Africa represents a microcosm of major global trends, and this “laboratory of poly-ethnic group relations may provide the referent or interpretive framework by which people make sense of their experiences organize their actions and influence their consumer responses. Results are consistent with prior literature suggests that contact among friends has more influence as a contact variable than work or neighborhood because of the choice element. Findings will contribute to our understanding of how social context and dynamics influence consumer response to marketing efforts. As we better understand how social dynamics influence consumer response, we can enrich and extend our theories, to better explain, and predict consumer behaviors in our dynamic marketplaces.

We conducted a field experiment with 176 English-speaking women in South Africa. Subjects’ ages ranged from 18-45 years old, and all had the equivalent of at least a U.S. high school education. In South Africa cross-racial contact was patterned for many years as a result of the Apartheid system. With this system, racial categorization was a defining feature of life for all South Africans. Four key categories defined the population in terms of race: Africans/Blacks (75%), Asians (3%), Coloured (9%), and Whites (13%). The apartheid ideology institutionalized group differences, which circumscribed the role of racial characteristics in every person’s life and still exists in everyday consciousness as a historical legacy (Adam, 1995; Foster & Finchilescu, 1986).

Further, South Africa represents a microcosm of major global trends, and this “laboratory of poly-ethnic group relations may provide the referent or interpretive framework by which people make sense of their experiences organize their actions and influence their consumer responses. Results are consistent with prior literature suggests that contact among friends has more influence as a contact variable than work or neighborhood because of the choice element. Findings will contribute to our understanding of how social context and dynamics influence consumer response to marketing efforts. As we better understand how social dynamics influence consumer response, we can enrich and extend our theories, to better explain, and predict consumer behaviors in our dynamic marketplaces.

1989). This measure allowed subjects to check the racial group to which they belonged, or to write-in one that was not listed.

As stimuli, we used identical advertisements from each of two current print advertising campaigns that varied only in their use of black or white models. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with psychological, consumer and marketing researchers, and pre-tested among a separate group of subjects to ensure clarity, comprehension and cultural relevance. Dependent variables included cross-group contact with reference to participants neighborhood, work and, friendship environments, attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the ad, and purchase intent.

Results suggest that increased cross-group contact can prompt either positive or negative attitudes to the ad and brand depending upon the race of the subject and/or advertisement. For blacks, increased contact seems to increase positive attitudes towards the white advertisement. Conversely, for whites, increased contact seems to create more negative attitudes towards the black advertisement. Results also suggest that cross-group contact may drive the effects of cross-group contact on ad and brand attitudes. Having friends in more racial groups leads to more cross race identification, which influences ad and brand attitudes. There were similar effects of contact in the neighborhood and at work. Further, the data show that cross-race identification occurs in terms of both the advertisements and the model in the advertisements. Findings also demonstrate that more cross-racial contact can lead to either other identification or other dis-identification, depending upon the race of the subject. Generally, cross-group contact with friends who are members of other races appears as the most important contact variable (relative to contact at work or in the neighborhood).

Results highlight how daily social interactions in communities, the workplace and friendship circles all serve as cultural contexts which provide the referent or interpretive framework by which people make sense of their experiences organize their actions and influence their consumer responses. Results are consistent with prior literature suggests that contact among friends has more influence as a contact variable than work or neighborhood because of the choice element. Findings will contribute to our understanding of how social context and dynamics influence consumer response to marketing efforts. Findings will also contribute to transformative consumer research efforts. As we better understand how social dynamics influence consumer response, we can enrich and extend our theories, to better explain, and predict consumer behaviors in our dynamic marketplaces.
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