Depicting Romantic Couples in Advertising: the Roles of Gender and Race on Audience Perceptions

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Previous research on race effects in advertising has focused on comparisons between racial groups and on evaluations towards models of different races. Potential gender effects within and between racial groups, however, are often overlooked. This paper focuses on the interrelationship between gender and race. In particular, the selectivity hypothesis is used to examine how Black and White men and women evaluate print ads portraying Black, White, and interracial couples. This research extends previous research since (i) the gender literature has not considered the influence of racial cues on processing strategies among men and women, and (ii) the racial literature has not fully addressed potential gender processing strategies in their studies. Hypotheses relating to Black and White men and women’s ability to identify with models of same and different races were supported. Results also suggest that ability to identify with the model mediates the audience’s attitude towards the ad.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gender and race are frequently used as a means for segmenting audiences in advertising. Such segmentation makes sense given research suggesting that men and women process information differently (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991; Putrevu, 2001) and that consumers differ in the way they evaluate advertisements featuring models of either their own race or another race (Green, 1999). At the same time, however, there are a variety of media outlets that target audiences from different sexes and races and carry promotional material for products that are appealing across gender (Orth and Holancova, 2004) and race. It is therefore important for advertisers to take into account the differences in information processing strategies between sexes and races when developing advertisements for products that are of interest to both and are to be displayed in mainstream media. Unfortunately, most of the research in this area tends to focus either on gender or on race and does not consider the potential interplay between the two.

This paper examines the gender and race relationship by considering how audiences evaluate advertisements featuring male and female models interacting with one another in a romantic setting. The use of romance is a commonly used advertising appeal in mainstream media because each gender is represented in the ad and can therefore be of appeal to men and women alike. In particular, we compare how Black and White men and women evaluate print advertisements depicting same-race and interracial Black/White heterosexual couples. The selectivity hypothesis and the in-group bias theory are used to develop a conceptual model for explaining how the audience reacts to the advertisements.

Within the advertising literature, the selectivity hypothesis is often used as a model to explain how men and women employ different strategies to process message cues (Myers-Levy, 1989; Putrevu, 2001). Females are driven by a goal to maximize the comprehensiveness of processing, and attempt to assimilate all available cues within the message. Males, on the other hand, are driven by the need to process the information efficiently, resorting to various heuristics to streamline the processing of information and focus on a subset of available cues. Men are thus viewed as 'selective processors' whereas women are seen as 'comprehensive processors' (Putrevu, 2001). At the same time, certain environmental factors may trigger more elaborate processing strategies among both males and females (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). We propose that the perceived importance of race among an audience may mediate the type of processing strategy used, particularly among males.

In-group bias theory (Brewer, 1979) is often used to explain why people can relate more to a model of their own race. The theory posits that individuals tend to evaluate members of their own group (the "in-group") more favorably than those not in their group (the "out-group"). According to the literature, in-group bias is particularly salient among minority groups (Operario and Fiske, 2001, McGuire, McGuire, Child, and Fujioka, 1978). Previous studies have found preferences among Blacks for advertisements depicting Black over White individuals (Schlinger and Plummer, 1972; Syzbillo, and Jacoby, 1974; Williams et al, 1995). At the same time, previous research suggests that Whites do not exhibit as strong a preference for advertisements with White models over Black models, which is probably due to the fact that in-group bias is less salient among the majority group when race is the group determiner (Whittler and DiMeeo, 1991; Williams, Qualls, and Grier, 1995; Appiah, 2001). These results would suggest that Blacks are more sensitive to the racial makeup of the model(s) in the advertisement compared to Whites.

We propose that the perceived salience between the models’ race and gender and the audience’s race and gender will influence their ability to identify with the model. For example, we expect the racial composition of the male model to be more salient among Black male respondents than Whitel male respondents. As such, White males are expected to identify with the male model no matter his race, whereas Black males are expected to identify only with the Black male model and not the White male model. We also propose that ability to identify with the model mediates the audience’s attitude towards the ad.

The hypotheses are tested using a 4 * 2 * 2 factorial design. A racial compilation of the couple (Black Man/Black Woman, Black Man/White Woman, White Man/Black Woman, White Man/White Woman) x race of respondent (Black vs. White) x gender of respondent (male vs. female) design was used. In order to test whether ability to identify with the model acts as a mediating variable for the audience’s attitude towards the advertisement, we ran a step-down analysis using MANOVA (Bagozzi and Yi, 1989; Nyer, 1997). The results suggest that the audience’s ability to identify with the model of the same gender in the advertisement has a significant mediating effect on attitude towards the advertisement. In line with the selectivity hypothesis (Levy-Myers, 1989), we found that the female respondents were likely to process the female model’s racial identity when determining whether they could identify with her. Among male respondents, however, there was a difference among Blacks and Whites in their ability to identify with the male models. Black respondents were more likely to identify with the Black model than the White model, whereas White respondents could identify with both the Black model in the interracial advertisement and the White model. Implications of these results for academics and practitioners are discussed.

REFERENCES


