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Did You See What I Saw? Gender, Image and the Satisfaction of Audience Members

By

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The authors thank Theatre Communications Group and the Duke University Provost’s Common Fund for supporting this research. The authors also thank the two participating theatres and the focus group participants whose insights informed and shaped our research.
We explore the effects of gender-related image perceptions on satisfaction through a study of audience members at two theatres. Results suggest that satisfaction is higher for men when they perceive an elevated level of functional service quality and for women when they perceive that the theatre possesses prosocial values. Satisfaction overlap exists when either men or women perceive market or artistic values. Rather than women globally elaborating message attributes at a lower threshold than men, it appears that a zone exists where both genders elaborate on some attributes while women further elaborate on communal attributes and men focus on agentic attributes.
In learning a new language, most of us have, at some time, felt confident in our level of comprehension following a social exchange, only to learn from someone else present that our understanding of the conversation was completely different than theirs. We parsed together those words and cues familiar to us while our companion picked up on different combinations of familiar words and meanings. Consumption experiences also can be perceived and interpreted completely differently from what the firm intended and from person to person, particularly in service contexts where the lack of tangibility leaves consumers searching for abstract clues to quality and expectation fulfillment (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985).

This heterogeneity of perception poses a specific challenge to marketers of services since perception strongly influences satisfaction, and satisfaction has been linked to positive economic consequences for the firm (Hirschman 1970; Kotler 1991; Oliver and Swan 1989). Yet how can firms improve customer satisfaction if it is subjectively based on customers’ rich diversity of needs and expectations? How can you manage that which you cannot control? It is within the power of the firm to control its product or service quality and its marketing messages, but it is up to the consumer to decide which needs receive priority and whether these needs are positively met by the consumption experience.

A key social factor that explains why and how perceptions vary from person to person is gender. A better understanding of the influence of gender and image on satisfaction can provide insight into which needs receive priority for which customers in somewhat complex service encounters. Ultimately, this understanding can help firms tailor marketing messages that promote those satisfaction triggers salient to men and those most meaningful to women. We argue that, in
marginally complex service encounters, men will achieve satisfaction with the service experience based upon their assessment of perceived functional attributes while women will achieve satisfaction based on their assessment of perceived value-expressive attributes.

**IMAGE, GENDER AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

Before exploring gender differences and perception, we take a step back and begin with a more global exploration of the concept of organizational image.

Image Construction and Dominant Traits

Organizational image is the cumulative, relatively stable, long-term, impression that is held by external constituents such as customers (Berg 1985; Fombrun 1996). Abric (1994) conceptualizes image, or “représentation sociales” as being hierarchically constructed around a core of information, beliefs and attitudes. Individuals and groups construct perceived images based on a variety of information including presented cues, past experience, knowledge, and social factors such as gender. In the end, dominant traits will form the essence of the image and play a central, privileged role. All remaining, less significant information will play only a peripheral role in the maintenance of the impression (Abric 1994).

Value-expressive versus Functional Image
Customers form an image of an organization based on affective or attitudinal responses to the organization’s values, the essential and enduring tenets of its mission communicated through value-expressive behaviors and messages (Collins and Porras 1996; Voss, Cable and Voss 2000), as well as cognitive assessments of the organization’s product or service functionality, such as its technical quality, functional quality, performance and usability (Grönroos 1983; Johar and Sirgy 1991; Sirgy et al. 1997). The two types of image are referred to as value-expressive image and functional image, respectively (Johar and Sirgy 1991; Sirgy et al. 1991; Sirgy et al. 1997).

Congruence with the value-expressive image attributes of a product or service has been found to be more predictive of consumer behavior for high involvement products and services that require consumers to consciously expound upon the message and engage in an examination of whether they share value priorities (Johar and Sirgy 1991; Sirgy et al. 1997). Customers compare their perceived organizational image with their own personal values to establish their level of organizational identification and subsequent relational commitment (Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001). Past conceptual and empirical research indicates that shared values play a significant role in developing and maintaining relationships between firms and customers (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Voss et al. 2000; Wilson 1995).

In service industries, functional image takes the form of service quality. Consumers judge a service by both its technical quality (i.e., perceptions of the quality of the core service delivered) and functional quality (i.e., perceptions of the manner in which the service is delivered, such as the quality of customers’ interaction with service personnel) (Eiglier and Langeard 1988; Parasuraman et al. 1985). Both types of quality contribute to consumer satisfaction.
Image, Gender, Perception and Priorities

The gender literature is rich with support for gender serving as a social force that drives men and women to establish disparate perceptions, needs and expectations. One respect in which women and men differ is in their information processing strategy, particularly with respect to the point of message cue complexity at which they engage in elaboration of the message (Krugman 1966; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991). Complex and incongruent messages force consumers to engage in more extensive examination and elaboration of product attributes (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989; Srull 1981). Messages that are very low or very high in message cue incongruity are shown to be processed similarly by men and women; however, women have been shown to have a lower threshold of cue incongruity at which they begin elaboration (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991).

Another respect in which the genders differ is in their priorities. Numerous studies have supported the contention that men are guided by emotionless, self-focused, agentic priorities whereas women are guided by emotion-laden communal goals, which seek harmony, affiliation, and the betterment of both self and others (Hall 1984; Hoyer and MacInnis 2004; Meyers-Levy 1988; Watts, Messe and Vallacher 1982; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). Meyers-Levy (1988: 528) cites evidence, “…that the genders’ sex role orientations can affect both the bases upon which they render judgments and the favorableness of their judgments.”
If we assume that women will elaborate message cues at a lower threshold than men, we can consider that the consumer behavior of women will be driven more by value-expressive image attributes than men. In other words, at a given level of message complexity, women will elaborate message cues by evoking value-expressive interpretations in search of value-congruity, whereas men, with lower propensity to elaborate messages, will place greater priority on functional attributes that require no in-depth emotional engagement. This research will seek to determine the extent to which women prioritize value-expressive attributes and men prioritize functional attributes in the formation of their image schema of a firm.

**SATISFACTION**

Customer satisfaction is heavily explored in the marketing literature since a high level of customer satisfaction has been linked to positive economic consequences for the firm (Hirschman 1970; Kotler 1991; Oliver and Swan 1989). Oliver (1996: 12) synthesizes prior definitions of satisfaction into the following:

Satisfaction is the consumer’s fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or overfulfillment.

According to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, satisfaction is a subjective assessment that one’s needs and expectations have been positively met (Brady, Cronin and Brand 2002; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1988).

The gender literature exploring satisfaction has presented mixed results. Some studies report no significant differences between the genders and their level of satisfaction (Carmel 1985; Ross et
al. 1999), others have found women to experience higher levels of satisfaction than men (Buller and Buller 1987), and still others report that men are more satisfied with a service than women over time (Bendall-Lyon and Powers 2002). Rather than follow past researchers and predict direct effects of gender on satisfaction, we take into account the genders’ priorities and image perceptions in the formation of their overall level of satisfaction. If women prioritize value-expressive attributes and men prioritize functional attributes of a product or service, then it follows that: 1) women who perceive a pleasurable level of value-expressive attributes will experience higher levels of satisfaction and 2) men who perceive a pleasurable level of functional attributes will experience higher levels of satisfaction. We seek to ascertain whether these two propositions can be supported.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Study Context

The research reported in this paper empirically examines the perceived image and satisfaction levels of male and female audience members of two nonprofit professional theatres in the United States (hereafter referred to simply as “theatres”). In the U.S., the nonprofit sector is the third largest contributor to the gross domestic product and employs more people than the state and federal governments combined (Lowell, Silverman and Taliento 2000). Nonprofit organizations exist to fulfill a mission that serves the public. Hence, value-expressive attributes are particularly salient features of any nonprofit organization’s service, as are the functional attributes that reflect the quality of the service experience.
Theatres provide an excellent context for the study of gender and image perceptions on satisfaction. The service provided by a theatre is complex. If the consumer is familiar with the theatre company and its work, he or she may have first-knowledge of the organization’s values as stated in published materials such as brochures, newspaper articles, and websites. Alternatively, a consumer may form an image of the theatre’s values based on his or her observation of the theatre’s behavior, such as its play selection decisions and arts education programs. Incongruent images may form when the theatre’s messages about its values diverge from its behavior. Complex messages that address multiple values also may lead to perceptions of incongruity.

Consumers also encounter tangible and functional aspects of the theatre’s service quality. Tangible quality of the theatre’s core service can be assessed by evaluating the quality of the performances, the production elements, or the season in general, and functional quality is evaluated in the course of interaction with the theatre’s service personnel such as box office workers and ushers. Absorbed together, the value-expressive and functional attributes of a theatrical experience can form a complex image profile.

Survey Instrument Development

This research began with an examination of the gender, image, organizational values and satisfaction literature. Built upon the literature review, a preliminary survey instrument was developed and two focus groups were conducted in Durham, North Carolina, with audience
members of a nonprofit professional theatre company in September 2001 and April 2002. The purpose of these focus groups was to: (1) develop a consensus on the relevant dimensions of organizational image in an artistic context, (2) garner global perspectives on the importance of organizational image to satisfaction, and (3) gain feedback on the validity of the proposed survey instrument.

Every attempt was made to retain consistency across focus group discussions. Participants were asked to review the survey instrument and respond to a series of questions about its clarity and comprehensiveness towards the start of the focus group. Themes emerged in the qualitative data that provided support for concepts proposed in the literature. For example, consistent with data collection recommendations made by Sirgy et al. (1997), customers wanted the option of selecting 'no opinion' if they felt that they did not have a perspective on a particular image characteristic. Both audience discussions lasted roughly 1.25 hours and were tape-recorded.

Participants

Over a total of ten performances, 78 male and 73 female audience members at two theatres participated in a survey and completed the entire questionnaire. There was an attempt made to control for a variety of external and organizational variables that might affect consumer response. This study identified two theatres with similar traits (see table 1). The two selected theatres operate in U. S. East Coast metropolitan markets with similar population, a similar level and composition of competition amongst theatres, and they are of similar age, seating capacity, and budget size with a similar size board of directors. Both theatres produce intellectually
challenging, edgy, and provocative work. In fact, both theatres had produced two of the same plays within the past two seasons: *The Invention of Love* and *Indian Ink*, both by Tom Stoppard.

Overall, the audience demographics at the two theatres are similar.

Insert table 1 about here

Stimulus

At both theatres, surveys were administered during five performances of the last production of the season. They were inserted as a program stuffer and distributed to all patrons. At each performance, the house manager made a curtain speech encouraging patrons to fill out the survey and explained where completed surveys would be collected. We received a 14% response rate at one theatre and 27% at the other. Overall, the audience demographics of respondents at the two theatres are similar. One theatre’s audience members were slightly younger and slightly less affluent. The male/female ratio of respondents was skewed slightly female: 40/60 at one theatre and 45/55 at the other; 65% of respondents were married.

The value-expressive attribute survey instrument consisted of a 15-item scale designed to measure five organizational value dimensions using seven-point Likert scales anchored by one=‘somewhat important’ and seven=‘extremely important’. This research adapted the five value dimensions of nonprofit professional theatres supported in the research of Voss et al. (2000), with minor modifications that reflect the shift from measuring values from the firm’s perspective to measuring customers’ perceived image of the organization’s values. Focus group
discussions indicated that the values were relevant and comprehensive. The five value dimensions are as follows (Voss et al. 2000):

*Artistic Values.* Artistic values reflect prioritization of the intrinsic drive for artistic creativity, innovation, and independence.

*Prosocial Values.* As nonprofit organizations, theatres are responsible for providing community access to the arts, removing economic and cultural barriers to attendance, and educating audiences about the art. Prosocial values reflect priorities of expanding community access to and appreciation for art.

*Market Values.* Theatres also struggle between creating art for art’s sake and meeting customer needs and expectations. Market values prioritize a commitment to customer satisfaction.

*Achievement Values.* Public recognition and acclaim for achievement can affirm an organization’s creative activity, and some theatres strive for *external* recognition for their excellence. Achievement values prioritize striving for publicly-recognized excellence.

*Financial Values.* Although all theatres must contend with the reality of financial demands while pursuing artistic creativity and achievement, fiscal stability is a high priority for some theatres. Financial values emphasize ensuring the financial stability and security of the theatre.

The exploratory factor analyses results provide support for the five proposed perceived image items and indicate that the constructs are, indeed distinct. One item related to achievement
values, “Produces theatre recognized for its excellence,” exhibited poor psychometric properties as suggested by non-unique loadings and was deleted from this and subsequent analyses.

Organizations may possess varying levels of each of the five types of identity. Being strong on one type does not rule out possessing some level of another. Organizations may possess a constellation of traits that uniquely form its identity. Similarly, a customer’s image of the organization’s value-expressive attributes may consist of a complex constellation of traits.

The functional image attribute survey instrument examined two dimensions of service quality in a theatergoing context: quality of the service offering (i.e., technical quality) and quality of the support of the service offering (i.e., functional quality) (Eiglier and Langeard 1988). Patrons were asked whether a series of statements accurately described their theatre on a Likert scale of one (not very well) to seven (extremely well). Specifically, two questions addressed the tangible quality of the service offering (i.e., “Casts first-rate, professional actors,” and “Invests in outstanding sets and costumes,”) and two questions addressed quality of the interaction with service personnel (i.e., “Employs courteous box office personnel,” and “Provides helpful ushers”).

Customer satisfaction was examined with three direct measures on a seven-point Likert scale. Specifically, audience members were asked to rate their satisfaction with the theatre’s current season as a whole, ticket prices, and the current performance. Overall customer satisfaction (Bitner and Hubbert 1994) is measured as the mean of customer responses to their satisfaction on the three satisfaction scales.
To confirm that the observed variables are acceptable measures of satisfaction and quality, exploratory factor analysis was performed for these items as well and supported two, distinct quality dimensions and one satisfaction dimension.

This research will examine whether there are significant differences in overall satisfaction due to: 1) gender, 2) value-expressive image attribute perceptions for each of the five organizational value images, 3) functional image attribute perceptions of both technical and functional quality, and 4) value-expressive and functional image perceptions for men vs. women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

We estimated three regression models in order to determine whether image and gender drive satisfaction. The first used the entire sample and explored the direct effects of sex variables (male = 1, female = 2), perceived value-expressive image, perceived functional image, and the interaction between each image variable and sex. Significant F-tests results with respect to the interaction terms indicated that men and women had significantly different levels of image perception. The second and third models explored the effect of the image variables on satisfaction for men and women separately. The desire to subscribe to next year’s season, a measure of an audience members’ trust that the theatre will provide a satisfying experience in the
coming year, was employed as a control variable since a high level of trust may influence satisfaction levels (Söderlund and Julander 2003).

Analyses revealed direct effects of intent to subscribe to the following season ($F = 5.59, p < .05$), artistic image ($F = 14.25, p < .01$), and market image ($F = 22.45, p < .01$) on satisfaction. Patrons who perceive the theatre as possessing either artistic values or market values report a higher level of satisfaction, regardless of whether they are men or women.

The interaction of sex and prosocial image ($F = 4.72, p < .05$) and sex and functional quality ($F = 5.07, p < .05$) warranted further examination. The separate models for men versus women provide insight into the driving forces behind satisfaction for the genders (see table 2). In confirmation of our proposition, men who perceive a higher level of functional service quality report higher levels of satisfaction. Women who perceive that the theatre possesses higher levels of prosocial values report greater satisfaction.

Discussion

These findings support our general contention that women who perceive a pleasurable level of value-expressive attributes will experience higher levels of satisfaction and men who perceive a pleasurable level of functional attributes will experience higher levels of satisfaction. Three value-expressive image attributes triggered satisfaction in women whereas only two provoked
satisfaction in men. Functional attributes led to higher levels of satisfaction for men but not for women.

Furthermore, it appears that, in a theatre context, satisfaction is determined not only by gender and image in general but by specific value-expressive and functional image attributes. Contrary to our predictions, there are certain value-expressive attributes that are equally salient to the satisfaction of men and women. Both men and women are more satisfied when they believe the theatre holds both artistic and market values. Since market values prioritize a commitment to customer satisfaction, it is not surprising that customers of either gender who perceive the theatre as having market values will experience a higher level of satisfaction. Satisfaction, in this case, may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Other theatre patrons may seek out artistic values, wanting the theatre to provide them with what is most creative and innovative (Voss and Voss 2000). As stated by one female and one male focus group participant, respectively, “If there is something new and different that provokes my thinking, I am very interested,” and, “I like things that are courageous.” In the search for better understanding of how gender influences satisfaction, overlap between the two genders offers as much insight as do differences (Hawkins and Coney 1976).

Functional quality attributes are more important to the satisfaction of men than women. Men report that they are more satisfied when they perceive higher quality service personnel. It appears that men base their satisfaction in part on how they were treated, a reflection of agentic priorities. This finding confirms Meyers-Levy’s (1988) assertion that men tend to aggressively pursue goals that have personal consequences.
Women, on the other hand, report higher levels of satisfaction when they perceive that the theatre possesses prosocial values, supporting the contention that women are more driven than men by communal goals. To recap, prosocial values indicate that the theatre prioritizes expanding community access to and appreciation for art. It appears that women are satisfied by a more profound experience at the theatre, particularly when they believe the organization is concerned about the cultural welfare of the entire community.

It is surprising to find that assessments of the tangible quality of the core service offering (i.e., quality of the performances, the season, etc.) appear not to influence satisfaction for either men or women. The importance of service quality is widely accepted as one of the key elements of successful strategic marketing. There is a substantive body of research supporting the notion that service quality assessments are an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Brady, Cronin and Brand 2002; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1985, 1988; Rust and Oliver 1994). This finding also runs contrary to focus group comments such as, “I think it’s all about keeping the quality. All of the other stuff is nice to know but even given that, if you didn’t have good performances I probably wouldn’t go.” Perhaps quality of the core service is equally important to men and women, but it is not important enough to stimulate satisfaction when other factors of the consumption experience are taken into account in complex encounters.

SUMMARY
The results of this study reinforce the perspective that women are driven more by communal goals and men are driven more by agentic goals. Women are more satisfied when they perceive the presence of prosocial values and men are more satisfied when they perceive a high level of quality in the support of the service offering. Marketing messages promoting an image of prosocial values can be targeted for appeal to women, whereas those emphasizing the organization’s excellent service personnel can be designed to appeal to men.

This study extends our understanding of the elaboration threshold of men and women. Rather than women holding a lower threshold at which they begin elaboration of message attributes in incongruent or complex situations relative to men, it appears that a zone exists where men and women both elaborate on some attributes, while women further elaborate on attributes that reflect communal goals and men remain focused on attributes that address agentic goals. One can also consider that men may possess the ability to recognize and reconcile complex or incongruent value-expressive attributes while maintaining a need for functional, agentic fulfillment.

Future studies might build upon our examination in a number of ways. An attempt was made to control for a variety of characteristics that might influence consumer perceptions such as organizational age, size, market characteristics, and programming decisions. It would be instructive to examine whether this study’s findings extend to audiences of other theatres that are younger/older, larger/smaller, produce work that is more/less challenging, and operate in markets that are more/less sophisticated and densely competitive than those of the two, chosen theatres of this study. Our study asked audience members to report their sex. Future studies would benefit
from a more extensive and probing exploration of audience member sex roles and gender. Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that live theatre audiences tend to be more educated and affluent than the general population, which limits generalization of our results to men and women on the whole.

The lack of findings with respect to satisfaction and the quality of the core service is particularly surprising. It would be instructive to discover whether replication of these results would surface in other service contexts, or whether it is unique to the nonprofit professional theatre industry. Finally, it is worth noting the conundrum that conflicting image perceptions pose for marketers. This study was conducted during the final production of the season at two theatres. Men and women at both theatres sat in the same audience, watched the same production, and came away with a diversity of images of the experience spanning the range of value-expressive and functional attributes. It appears that regardless of what values a theatre holds as core to its mission and what messages it communicates about these values through word and action, it is patrons’ image of the theatre's values that drives satisfaction. Whether that image is or is not in tune with the organization’s core values is of little or no importance. What matters is that the customer perceives the presence of certain traits. The results support the postmodernist perspective that people form images based on their subjective perceptions and filters, and that, “objective knowledge of reality is impossible” (Bristor and Fischer 1993: 524). A better understanding of which images trigger satisfaction for men and women can help marketers create and target a broad selection of messages.
REFERENCES


## TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF THEATRE ENVIRONMENTAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Theatre 1</th>
<th>Theatre 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metro area population</td>
<td>5,100,931</td>
<td>4,923,153</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money Magazine arts index rating</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local competition density (# comparable theatres)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating Capacity</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annual Budget</td>
<td>$2,800,000</td>
<td>$2,995,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization Age</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Board Members</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Variables</td>
<td>Male Satisfaction</td>
<td>Female Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value-Expressive Image Attributes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Image</td>
<td>.26&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.43&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Image</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.22&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Image</td>
<td>.53&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.44&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Image</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Image</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Functional Image Attributes:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical Quality</td>
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<td>-.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional Quality</td>
<td>.19&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.15</td>
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<td>Intent to Subscribe to Next Season</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Model R²</strong></td>
<td>.52&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.51&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Significant at p < .01 (one-tailed t-test)
<sup>b</sup> Significant at p < .05 (one-tailed t-test)
<sup>c</sup> Significant at p < .10 (one-tailed t-test)