Using Market-Specific Symbols in Advertising to Attract Gays and Lesbians Without Alienating the Mainstream

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Why should marketers risk alienating heterosexual consumers by placing ads with gay content in mainstream media? First, an enormous proportion of gays and lesbians cannot be reached through gay media. While the number of advertisers who target the ADream Market@ in gay media continues to grow (Wall Street Journal 1999), a placement of an ad in OUT and The Advocate, the two most widely circulated gay magazines, will reach only 3% of the gay and lesbian population, at most (Poux 1998). Conversely, more than 90% of gay men and 82% of lesbians reportedly read mainstream magazines. Second, by bringing gay issues into the mainstream, marketers may stand to gain from the goodwill of gay and lesbian consumers who strive for the acceptance of gays and lesbians into mainstream society. Penaloza (1996) contends that many gay and lesbian consumers consider their inclusion in marketplace activities as recognition of the progress of the gay social movement.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why should marketers risk alienating heterosexual consumers by placing ads with gay content in mainstream media? First, an enormous proportion of gays and lesbians cannot be reached through gay media. While the number of advertisers who target the “Dream Market” in gay media continues to grow (Wall Street Journal 1999), a placement of an ad in OUT and The Advocate, the two most widely circulated gay magazines, will reach only 3% of the gay and lesbian population, at most (Poux 1998). Conversely, more than 90% of gay men and 82% of lesbians reportedly read mainstream magazines. Second, by bringing gay issues into the mainstream, marketers may stand to gain from the goodwill of gay and lesbian consumers who strive for the acceptance of gays and lesbians into mainstream society. Peñaloza (1996) contends that many gay and lesbian consumers consider their inclusion in marketplace activities as recognition of the progress of the gay social movement.

Thus, to provide advertisers with a better understanding of how to effectively cross-over into mainstream media with gay- and lesbian-targeted advertisements without alienating larger mainstream audiences, this study examines the responses of both heterosexual and homosexual consumers to advertising content that includes mainstream imagery, implicit gay and lesbian imagery, and explicit gay or lesbian imagery.

To date, firms that have used gay imagery in mainstream media have predominantly used depictions of gay males in their advertising, mirroring the enormous bias toward male-oriented advertising in gay and lesbian media (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2000). While the use of gay male imagery may represent effective targeting in gay and lesbian media with a predominantly male readership, it may result in the highest risk of backlash from heterosexual audiences in mainstream media. Bhat, Leigh and Wardlow (1999) found that mainstream consumers reacted less favorably to advertising depicting gay male imagery than advertising depicting heterosexual imagery. Drawing on research from the social sciences that suggests that heterosexuals have more positive attitudes toward lesbians than gay males, Oakenfull and Greenlee (Forthcoming) showed that these attitudes tend to be transferred to responses to gay and lesbian imagery in advertising. Hence, advertisers may reduce the potential for negative backlash from mainstream audiences by including depictions of lesbians rather than gay males in their advertising in mainstream media (Oakenfull and Greenlee (Forthcoming)).

However, while mainstream consumers may prefer lesbian imagery to gay imagery in advertising, marketers must consider whether the use of any type of explicit same-sex imagery would be received more negatively than a mainstream advertisement by mainstream consumers, thus alienating the majority for the sake of targeting the few. Despite the fact that heterosexual consumers may be more favorably disposed to advertising depicting lesbians than those with gay males (Oakenfull and Greenlee (Forthcoming)), drawing from Identity theory, we know that consumers respond less favorably to advertisements that do not reflect their self-identity (Jaffe 1991). Thus, we can expect mainstream consumers to fail to identify with advertising that contains explicitly gay or lesbian imagery, which will result in a relatively less favorable attitude toward the advertisement.

Method

Participants in the study included 118 self-identified homosexual adults, including 46 females and 68 males, and 134 heterosexual adults, 74 females and 60 males from five geographic regions of the United States. Participants were presented with the four advertisements—1) a mainstream advertisement, 2) an advertisement with implicit gay and lesbian imagery, 3) an advertisement with explicit gay male imagery, and 4) an advertisement with explicit lesbian imagery, and instructed to answer a three-item attitude toward the advertisement measure accompanying each advertisement.

Findings

This study shows that, while depictions of gay males and lesbians in advertising will effectively target gay and lesbian consumers, they will also result in an unfavorable response from mainstream consumers. The results of this study indicate that heterosexual consumers are more averse to advertisements depicting
gay males and lesbians than mainstream advertising content. However, while heterosexual consumers preferred advertisements with mainstream imagery to those with explicit gay or explicit lesbian imagery, advertisements containing implicit gay and lesbian imagery were received as well as those with mainstream imagery. Thus, it can be assumed that mainstream audiences were either unaware that the advertisement contained gay and lesbian imagery or responded more favorably to the more subtle content.

Gay and lesbian consumers have an equally favorable response to all types of gay- and lesbian-targeted advertising including those with implicit gay and lesbian imagery. Thus, by using implicit gay and lesbian imagery in advertising placed in mainstream media, marketers can appeal to gay and lesbian consumers in mainstream media with little risk of creating negative sentiments among heterosexual consumers.