The Generation Gap: a Baby Boomer Vs. Gen Y Comparison of Religiosity, Consumer Values, and Advertising Appeal Effectiveness

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This research explores the relationship among religiosity and other consumer values, namely materialism, value expression through brands, and consumption ethics, in a sample comprised of members of the Baby Boom and Generation Y cohorts. In addition, the influence of generation and these individual differences on attitudes toward several advertising appeal types is tested. Findings suggest that these two generations do differ in their levels of religiosity and other consumer values and also in their response to advertising appeals, and that the values also influence advertising appeal effectiveness beyond the impact of generation.

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The Generation Gap: A Baby Boomer vs. Gen Y Comparison of Religiosity, Consumer Values, and Advertising Appeal Effectiveness

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Marketing academics have increasingly shown an interest in consumer values over the past decade, with materialism garnering most of the research attention (see, e.g., Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Richins 1994). Relatively little consumer researcher has been done on religious values, despite the fact that religion is an influential and important aspect of American and many other cultures, impacting consumer attitudes (e.g., towards divorce, music, political issues), values (e.g., altruism, sexual morality, work ethic), and behaviors (e.g., food and alcohol consumption, holiday celebrations, dress) at both the individual and societal levels. (For notable exceptions, see Hirschman 1983; LaBarbera and Gurhan 1997; Wilkes, Burnett, and Howell 1986.) This research attempts to fill some of the gaps in extant knowledge about how religion and other values may influence consumer behavior by examining the relationship between religiosity and materialism, as well as two related sub-values: concern for consumption ethics and value expression through brands. These values are compared across two generations of consumers of high interest to marketers today: Gen Y and Baby Boomers. In addition, this study tests the influence of generation and consumer values on the effectiveness of several types of advertising appeals. With respect to values, members of Generation Y were expected to be more materialistic, more likely to use brands as communication devices, and more concerned about the ethics of consumption as compared to Baby Boomers. Little is known at this point about Generation Y’s level of religiosity, so this was an open research question. With respect to appeal types, members of Generation Y were expected to respond more positively to advertising in general, and in particular to image, indulgence, eco, and sex appeals.

The sample for this study consisted of 264 Baby Boomers and 213 members of Generation Y. The method was a pencil and paper experiment in which each participant evaluated four advertisements drawn from the following set: image vs. functional appeals, value vs. indulgence appeals, waste vs. eco appeals, and high sex vs. low sex appeals. In the first three categories, the ads were for either a car (a public, durable product) or for a shampoo (a private, nondurable product). Both sex appeals were for cologne. In all cases, fictitious brand/organization names were used and ad presentation order was rotated and counter-balanced across subjects. Participants’ attitudes toward each of the four ads and intention to purchase the advertised product were assessed on ten Likert-type items, all on seven-point scales. Participants also completed multi-item scales to assess individual differences in religiosity, materialism, brand value expressiveness, and consumption ethics, and were asked to report their religious affiliation (if any), gender, age, education, income, and marital status. All multi-item scales were subjected to factor analysis, and composite variables were created for use in further analysis.

The results of the data analysis support the majority of the initial hypotheses. As expected, members of Generation Y were more materialistic and more likely to use brands as communication devices than members of the Baby Boom generation. They were also less significantly less religious on every measure, providing a preliminary answer to this research question. However, there was no significant difference between the two generations in concern regarding the ethics of their consumption practices. With respect to responsiveness to appeal types, Gen Y’ers responded more positively to image, indulge, and sex appeals, as expected. However, they also responded more positively to function appeals, which was not specifically hypothesized, and no difference was found in response to eco, value, or waste appeals between the two generations. In addition, regression analyses were run separately for each of the four consumer values to test the interactions among generation, value, and appeal type factors. Several complex, higher-order interactions were found, but due to space constraints, cannot be discussed here.

This research potentially makes a couple of contributions to the study of consumer values and advertising effectiveness. First, the study examines religiosity and several other consumption-related values in two important generational cohorts to construct a more complete picture of religious consumers as a group. Although materialism and, to a lesser extent, religiosity have both been examined in the literature, the relationship between the two has not yet been fully explored. Furthermore, consumption ethics, its ties to religiosity, and the connection between brand value expressiveness and religiosity are also new to the literature. By explicating these relationships, a clearer picture of how these values relate to consumption may be obtained. Furthermore, the cross-generational nature of this study yields additional insights into these value constellations. Second, this research explores how generation and consumer values impact advertising appeal effectiveness. Studies on appeal effectiveness for different personality types and subcultures have been limited in general, so more
work is needed in this area. In addition, despite the apparently strong influence of religion and religiosity on a wide variety of consumer attitudes, values, and behaviors, this area has received much less attention than some other similar areas of influence (e.g., race or ethnicity). Although the results of the present research are limited in scope, it appears likely that religion and religiosity may have important implications for segmentation, targeting, and advertising strategy development and may serve as the basis for an important area of transformative consumer research.

References:

Bilingual Processing of Advertising from a Psycholinguistic Perspective: The Link Between Attributes Remembered and Attributes Preferred
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When marketers first studied cross cultural communications the focal audience was African-Americans and the usual issue was the ethnic match between perceiver and spokesperson(s) (For a review see Whittler, 1991).

As immigration from the south increased, researchers set their sights on the Hispanic market. In order to study this group, language necessarily became an operant variable. However, researchers seemed to be accepting the theoretical implication of an invalidated premise—the Whorfian hypothesis of linguistic relativity (Whorf 1956)—by treating language and culture as if though they were completely dependent on each other. As a result, most studies looked at cross cultural communication from a strictly cultural/social perspective and demoted language to the status of a corollary variable.

Seemingly justified by this type of research, Madison Avenue came up with a most disingenuous solution to the issue of how to communicate with ethnic target populations: simply translate the message to their dominant language. However, very little theory-based research exists to validate such an approach (Luna & Peracchio 2002).

The psycholinguistics literature suggests there are universal aspects of language learning and production, including characteristics of second language acquisition, encoding, and recall regardless of what language(s) we consider. Working from this knowledge, Luna & Peracchio have begun to study cross cultural marketing communications from a psycholinguistic perspective (Luna & Peracchio 1999, 2001, 2002).

Although Luna & Peracchio have looked at the quantity of recall by bilinguals when processing a second language message, and have concluded that the extra cognitive effort results in less recall for bilinguals than monolinguals, they have not considered the possibility that the information bilinguals do recall may be more valuable from a cognitive and/or affective standpoint than the information monolinguals are able to recall.

Contrary to what Kroll & Stewart’s Revised Hierarchical Model and the Conceptual Mediation Model have suggested, Silverberg and Samuel (2004) found that bilinguals who had learned their second language past the age of seven, did not exhibit any cross language semantic priming regardless of their second language proficiency. The cut off age of seven was based on research which found that during the planning of second language words, bilinguals who learned their second language after the age of seven, showed significantly different brain activation patterns than bilinguals who had learned their second language before the age of seven (Kim et al, 1997). This information leads us to believe that bilinguals who learn their second language after the age of seven (highly representative of U.S. adult immigrants), are likely to engage in more lexical activity than many theories would suggest.

For bilinguals, second language lexical to first language lexical activation results in a form of elaborative rehearsal as information is linked between short term and long term memory and both a lexical link and a conceptual link are activated. Elaborative rehearsal has been shown to improve episodic memory (Kellog 2003). It is believed that the extra elaboration undertaken by bilinguals, will result in a generation effect: better memory for target items that are generated (Slamecka & Graf 1978). Research has shown the occurrence of a bilingual generation effect (O’Neill, Roy, & Tremblay, 1993).

We intended to show that presenting a second language selling message to a bilingual may actually result in better recall of personally relevant attributes for any given product category, than would be the case for monolinguals.

It has been said that “recognition of the impact of attribute importance on information search is so widespread... that information acquisition behavior is accepted as a direct measure of attribute importance” (Mackenzie 1986, p.174). It therefore stands to reason that in an advertising context, a developing bilingual will begin to learn, recognize, and pay special attention to words representing the attributes he/she feels are most important in the focal product category. Because second language word recognition is not as automatic as first language recognition, a bilingual is better able to focus on the “important” words and essentially ignore the rest.

Our research began with a pilot study; a nested 2 x (2 x 2) between-subjects design: Hi/Lo-Motivation, Monolingual/Bilingual-Language, Forced/Unforced-translation (for bilinguals only). Subjects were randomly assigned to each of the controllable conditions.