The Politics of Target Marketing

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Although cultural targeting seems apposite within the context of contemporary multicultural society, in certain countries, national norms dictate that marketers should focus on the homogeneity of the market rather than its diversity. Two experiments demonstrate how sociopolitical ideologies at both individual- and national-levels influence consumers’ responses to culturally targeted practices.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As cultural diversity grows, marketers increasingly adapt their strategies by taking into account groups of consumers which were not traditionally targeted. However, although targeting on the basis of cultural identity seems “normal” in numerous countries, it engenders important debates in many others which consider the practice as a threat to national unity. In such contexts, culturally-based targeting can be considered as a “taboo marketing practice” and has the potential to undermine brand equity if not handled correctly, i.e. in compliance with the national norms (Hetzel 2003). The present research offers a preliminary understanding of the role of sociopolitical ideologies in the effectiveness of identity-based marketing practices.

In the political debate of many countries, two contradictory ideological perspectives on the integration of “immigrants” can be distinguished. The first one, multiculturalism, advocates a truly multicultural society wherein all cultural groups can live in harmony while preserving their own identities. The second, assimilation, encourages the absorption of immigrant cultures into the existing dominant culture (Guimond et al. 2013). Government diversity policies have historically been influenced by either the first model (e.g. Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom) or by the second one (e.g. France, South Africa, United States). Nevertheless, many countries have navigated from one model to another. For instance, despite its historical “Melting Pot” rhetoric, it had become accepted that the US has failed to melt the new immigrants and rather adopted a multicultural approach (Glazer 1997). In essence most countries have moved from an ideal/philosophical assimilationist model to a more applicable/practical multicultural approach. However, Brubaker (2001) argues that the apogee of the multicultural perspective has been reached at the end of the twentieth century. Since then he discerns signs of a “return of assimilation” which focuses on civic integration over the valuation of cultural differences.

Extant consumer research examining the effectiveness of identity-based segmentation and targeting strategies (see Reed et al. 2012 for a review) has not taken into consideration either sociopolitical differences across countries or these recent shifts. Most of this literature, rooted within the North American context, implicitly assumes that international generalization of findings is possible without specific reference to (changing) political contexts. However, because targeting on the basis of cultural identity highlights cultural differences within the marketplace, it becomes problematic as nations (re-)endorse an assimilationist perspective. In particular, an emerging body of research in social psychology demonstrates how the actual diversity policies implemented by countries influence identity-based attitudes and intergroup relations (see Guimond et al. 2013). Accordingly, the present research examines whether the preference for one or the other ideological model of integration (multiculturalism versus assimilation) predicts non-targeted consumers’ responses to identity-based marketing strategies. Next, we present two experiments that evaluate the influence of sociopolitical ideologies on target marketing at the individual-level (Study 1) and at the national-level (Study 2).

Study 1 used a 2 (Targeting Strategy: Non-culturally Targeted vs. Culturally Targeted) × (Individual-Level Sociopolitical Ideology) between-subjects experimental design. We conducted this web-based experiment in March-April 2013 with 68 non-Muslim French students. We selected France as an appropriate context of research since its specific diversity policies have historically had an assimilationist goal which has led to one of the strongest denunciations of multicultural segmentation in the world (see Hetzel 2003). We specifically focused on non-targeted consumers’ reactions to strategies targeting Muslim consumers. In the cover story, participants were told that the study assessed their opinion about a project for new restaurants. In the first condition, respondents read a project description for new restaurants that will only sell organic foods. In the second condition, the restaurants will only sell foods which are simultaneously organic and halal. After the project was presented, purchase intention was measured as well as the personal attitudes towards assimilation and multiculturalism (see Guimond et al. 2013). The variable sociopolitical ideology was computed as the difference between the assimilation and the multiculturalism scales. A high value for sociopolitical ideology corresponded to a high preference for assimilation and a low preference of multiculturalism.

Results showed that purchase intention was significantly higher for the organic restaurants compared to the organic halal restaurants. However, we also found that this main effect was moderated by respondents’ sociopolitical ideology such as the purchase intention for the organic halal restaurants was significantly lower for consumers that exhibited preference for assimilation (vs. those who displayed preference for multiculturalism). Consequently and as expected, individuals’ sociopolitical ideologies determine their reaction to culturally targeted strategies.

To further generalize our findings, we examined the reactions to target marketing using a different proxy for sociopolitical ideologies, one based on cross-national differences. France was used to represent a preference for assimilation whereas the US was used for multiculturalism. Study 2 used a 2 (Targeting Strategy: Non-culturally Targeted vs. Culturally Targeted) × 2 (National-Level Sociopolitical Ideology: USA [Multiculturalism] vs. France [Assimilation]) quasi-experimental between-subjects design. We conducted a web-based experiment in April 2013 with 54 non-Muslim French students recruited from a Parisian university and 70 non-Muslim American students recruited from a university in Washington, D.C. The scenario described a new online and mobile food ordering company. In the first condition, the company specialized in organic foods whereas in the second condition it specialized in organic halal foods. We used the same measurements as in study 1.

Confirming our operationalization, American students were higher on multiculturalism while French students were higher on assimilation. Second, we found a significant interaction between country group and targeting strategy such as in France the purchase intention for the organic halal foods company was significantly lower than for the organic foods company, whereas there was no significant difference in the US.

This paper provides preliminary insights into the role of sociopolitical ideologies in the effectiveness of target marketing and extends our understanding of consumer responses to multicultural marketing. By comparing contexts and illuminating sociopolitical differences, this research reveals the challenges that (international) businesses may face as their increasing recognition of cultural diversity is paralleled by a (re-)endorsement of assimilationist visions. As such, understanding sociopolitical dynamics emerges as a key step in “advancing (cross-cultural) connections” successfully.
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