When Diversity in Advertising Leads to Activism Vs. Aversion

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We suggest that although consumers may purchase from brands that support diversity because doing so is consistent with their own beliefs on human rights and equality, many consumers may be uncomfortable with certain portrayals of diversity because such portrayals go against their schemas or expectations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of our research is to understand not only how consumers respond to diversity in advertising, but also to examine why consumers respond differently to ads portraying diversity in a subtle manner relative to ads that make stronger statements regarding their stance on diversity. We wish to extend prior research by examining consumers’ responses to other traditionally excluded groups (i.e., interracial couples, overweight women) and provide a more systematic examination of when increased diversity in advertising may lead to positive or negative consequences for the promoted brand. We suggest that consumers respond negatively to certain portrayals of diversity not necessarily because of overt prejudice (as shown in prior research), but because such portrayals go against their schemas or expectations.

STUDY PROCEDURE OVERVIEW

A similar procedure was used for all our studies. Participants recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk were asked to view an ad that targeted a consumer group (families in Studies 1 and 3, women in Study 2) and randomly assigned to view an either more or less diverse ad. Next, participants used seven-point scales to rate their interest in purchasing (1=low, 7=high), opinion of (1=very bad, 7=very good), and liking (1=dislike very much, 7=like very much) for the advertised brand. Then participants completed Paharia et al.’s (2015) Purchase Activism Scale which measured the extent to which participants were willing to purchase the advertised brand because it aligned with their personal beliefs (e.g., “The product embodies the ideals I live by.”) In Studies 2 and 3, participants also rated the extent to which viewing the ad made them feel disgusted, angry, revolted, irritated, accepting, affectionate, happy, and pleased (last 4 items reverse-scored; Bhat et al. 1998). Participants also provided their gender, age and race, which had no significant effects on our results (with the exception of gender in Study 2).

STUDY 1: INTERRACIAL PARENTS

Method

Study 1 had a 2(Target consumer: Parents (target) vs. Non-parents (nontarget)) x 2(Ad diversity: Interracial vs. white parents) between-subjects design (N=90). In Study 1, the more diverse ad featured a family with an African American father, white mother, and biracial child while the less diverse ad featured a family with white, heterosexual parents and a white child. The promoted brand Cheerios was positioned as offering “convenient breakfasts for busy families.” Parental status was determined by asking participants to indicate whether or not they had children at the end of the study.

Results

We conducted a 2(Target consumer: Parents vs. Non-parents) x 2(Ad diversity: Interracial vs. white parents) ANOVA on our dependent variables with modern racism as a covariate.

Brand evaluations ($\alpha=.86$)

Analysis revealed only a main effect of ad diversity ($F(1, 85)=5.79, p<.05$), where the more diverse ad elicited more favorable evaluations overall. Further contrasts indicated that parents evaluated Cheerios more favorably after viewing the ad containing interracial parents ($M=4.90$) relative to the one containing white parents ($M=4.14$; $F(1, 85)=5.79, p<.05$). However, ad diversity had a weaker effect on non-parents’ evaluations ($M_{Interracial}=4.73$ vs. $M_{White}=4.38$; $F(1, 85)=1.85$, NS).

Purchase activism ($\alpha=.89$)

Analyses yielded only a main effect ad diversity ($F(1, 85)=6.47, p<.05$). Further contrasts found that parents indicated greater purchase activism after viewing the more diverse interracial parents ad ($M=2.52$) relative to the white parents ad ($M=1.66$; $F(1, 85)=4.86$, $p<.05$) while this effect was weaker for non-parents ($M_{Interracial}=2.34$ vs. $M_{White}=2.02$; $F(1, 85)=1.55$, NS).

STUDY 2: OVERWEIGHT FEMALE MODELS

Method

Study 2 had a 2(Target consumer: Female (target) vs. Male (nontarget)) x 2(Ad diversity: Overweight vs. Thin Model) between-subjects design ($N=117$). Participants viewed a print ad promoting Dasani water that featured either a thin or overweight female.

Results

We tested our predictions by conducting a 2(Target consumer: Female vs. Male) x 2(Ad diversity: Overweight vs. Thin Model) ANOVA on each dependent variable with antifat attitudes and BMI as covariates.

Brand evaluations ($\alpha=.91$)

Analysis revealed only a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 111)=4.83, p<.05$). For female participants, the overweight model ad ($M=3.79$) garnered less favorable evaluations relative to the thin model ad ($M=4.47$; $F(1, 111)=4.39, p<.05$). However, this was not the case for male participants ($M_{Overweight}=4.33$ vs. $M_{Thin}=4.00$; $F(1, 111)=2.29$, NS).

Negative emotions ($\alpha=.85$)

Analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 111)=5.82, p<.05$). Contrasts indicated that the overweight model ($M=3.79$) elicited more negative emotions from female participants compared to the thin model ($M=2.05$; $F(1, 111)=6.34, p<.05$). However, this was not the case for male participants ($M_{Overweight}=3.27$ vs. $M_{Thin}=4.00$; $F(1, 111)=1.24$, NS).

STUDY 3: GAY PARENTS

Method

Study 3 had a 2(Consumer target: Parents vs. Non-parents) x 2(Ad diversity: Gay vs. Straight Parents) by 2(Schema activation: Busy vs. Wholesome families) between-subjects design. Participants ($N=173$) viewed a Cheerios ad that featured an image of either a nontraditional family with white, homosexual parents (two fathers) or a traditional family with white, heterosexual parents (one father and mother). We positioned Cheerios as offering “convenient breakfasts for busy families” (activating the “busy family” schema) or a “wholesome breakfasts for wholesome families” (activating the
Taken together, our findings suggest that promoting diversity and inclusiveness can be an effective way for brands to garner support from consumers. However, marketers must have a good understanding of how the portrayal of diverse groups relates to consumers’ schemas.

REFERENCES