

# Targeting a Minority without Alienating the Majority: Advertising to Gays and Lesbians in Mainstream Media

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Although marketers generally consider homosexuals to be a desirable market segment, they are not targeted using mainstream media because it is expected that heterosexuals will react negatively to homosexual advertising messages. However, this study found that consumers' response to heterosexual or homosexual advertising content was affected by the type of homosexual imagery used in the advertisement and the gender and sexual orientation of the consumer viewing the advertisement. The findings indicate that marketers advertising to homosexual consumers using the mainstream media should use advertising incorporating gay and lesbian subcultural symbolism whenever possible.

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## **A MODERN DAY MARKETER'S DILEMMA**

Many marketers consider the homosexual consumer market to be a sort of "Dream Market" because of the belief that these consumers represent a sizable market segment possessing relatively large amounts of disposable income. One bit of evidence in support of this belief is a 1993 study by Overlooked Opinion, a gay-focused market research firm, that estimated homosexuals represented about 21 million people with total annual income of over \$641 billion (Witeck and Combs, 2006).

Historically, advertising to the homosexual consumer has been especially difficult due to a lack of media outlets targeting this particular group. Except for certain major metropolitan markets that could offer weekly newspapers, there was no good way to reach out to the homosexual community. However, and not surprisingly, as the recognition of the size and buying power of the homosexual market has become more known, marketers interested in reaching the homosexual consumer have found a growing number and variety of print media. In addition to a growing number of metropolitan area newspapers and magazines, there are also a number of nationally distributed homosexual publications such as *The Advocate* and *OUT* giving marketers more stylish and consumer-

oriented vehicles through which to reach the homosexual audience. As a result of this expansion, in 2006 alone, it was estimated that marketers spent over \$223.3 million in the homosexual print media (Wilke, 2007).

Although the growth in homosexual media has provided marketers with an avenue for targeting the homosexual consumer, it has been estimated that more than half of the homosexual population in the United States does not read homosexual media of any kind (Poux, 1998). Furthermore, a single insertion of an advertisement in *The Advocate* and *OUT*, the two most widely circulated homosexual magazines, will only reach about 3 percent of the homosexual population, making it difficult to create the amount of reach needed to effectively target this market. Conversely, more than 90 percent of gay men and 82 percent of lesbians reportedly read mainstream magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *People*, *National Geographic*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, *New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, *Vanity Fair*, *Men's Health*, and *Consumer Reports* (Tharp, 2001). Thus, it appears that marketers may need to use mainstream print media to generate the reach and frequency necessary to influence brand attitudes and purchase behaviors of the majority of the homosexual population.

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In addition to the typical reasons to use media to reach a target market, Peñaloza (1996) suggests that, as was the case with the "crossover" of African-Americans and Hispanics, homosexuals may consider their inclusion in mainstream marketplace activities as recognition of the progress of the gay social movement. Therefore, marketers advertising to homosexuals via mainstream media may be perceived as signaling an acceptance of this group not offered by competitors who choose not to use the mainstream media to target this group. As a result, marketers targeting the homosexual market may enjoy more positive brand attitudes and/or higher levels of purchase intent than would be engendered by the same advertising messages appearing solely in gay and lesbian media.

Although it would appear that marketers may benefit from reaching out to homosexual consumers, there is also the widely held assumption that an association with homosexual consumers may result in a strong negative reaction from many heterosexual consumers (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow, 1999). This belief was the primary motivation behind the decision of major automobile firms such as GM, Ford, and Chrysler to withdraw their scheduled advertising from the "coming-out" episode of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. This concern has persisted despite the fact that firms such as IKEA, Calvin Klein, Banana Republic, and Benetton have run advertisements targeting homosexuals in the mainstream media with little evi-

dence of any negative effects. However, the continued reluctance to advertise to homosexuals in the mainstream media is fueled, in part, by evidence that many heterosexuals are far from ready to welcome homosexuals into mainstream society. In recent Euro/RSCG and Time/CNN polls, between 42 and 48 percent of those surveyed believed that homosexual relationships were morally wrong (Gardyn and Fetto, 2002; Lacayo et al., 1998). Additionally, in 2006, Fleishman-Hillard's FH Out Front gay PR group found that 24 percent of heterosexuals would be less likely to purchase a new or everyday product if a company used gays and lesbians to market or promote it (Wilke, 2007). Thus, marketers may risk the nightmare of alienating a far greater percentage of the market in pursuit of the "Dream Market," particularly if they used messages specifically designed to appeal to homosexual consumers.

Given all of this, it appears that today's marketers are faced with a dilemma. If they choose to advertise to the potentially lucrative homosexual community using only homosexual media, they will miss the vast majority of the market who do not regularly consume this type of media. However, if they place homosexual-oriented advertising in the mainstream media, they may realize both a positive effect on homosexuals' brand attitudes and purchase intentions and a negative effect on the same outcomes for heterosexuals. Finally, if they simply choose to use mainstream advertis-

ing in mainstream media, they will not be able to capitalize on the potential for developing higher levels of brand identification and loyalty among homosexuals.

Although this dilemma is compelling, there is little empirical research guiding the practitioner as to the effects of homosexual advertising messages on both homosexual and heterosexual consumers. Given the potential upside and downside of advertising in the mainstream media to homosexual consumers, the present study was undertaken to address several key managerially relevant issues.

To begin with, we think it is important to empirically test the idea that heterosexuals and homosexuals will respond differentially to advertising messages that are either heterosexually-oriented or homosexually-oriented. Therefore, we attempt to replicate Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow's (1999) findings, based on in-group/out-group membership relating to sexual orientation, that (a) homosexuals react more favorably to homosexually-oriented advertising messages than to heterosexually-oriented (i.e., mainstream) advertising messages and (b) heterosexuals react less favorably to homosexually-oriented advertising messages than to mainstream advertising messages. However, research on identities in the social sciences would suggest that responses to homosexual-oriented advertising messages are affected by more than simply the sexual orientation of the reader.

Prior research has shown that the homosexual identity is only one of several identities incorporated into a gay or lesbian's self-concept (Troiden, 1988), and for some homosexuals, other factors, such as gender, may play a more pivotal role in defining identity than does sexual orientation. Additionally, gender identity may play a greater role for lesbians than gay men in defining their sense of self (Eliason, 1996; Rich, 1980; Rust, 1993).

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Thus, lesbians may identify more as women than as homosexuals while gay men tend to identify more as homosexuals (Eliason, 1996; Rich, 1980; Rust, 1993). This difference is attributed to the fact that lesbians face a type of societal double jeopardy insofar as they face challenges from being both female and homosexual. Gay men, on the other hand, have only to deal with society's acceptance, or lack thereof, of their homosexuality. Additionally, the *experience* of being homosexual may vary between gay men and lesbians because for gay men, sexual identity has been primarily associated with gay activity, whereas for lesbians there is a much stronger political and emotional component (Eliason, 1996). Thus, if marketers are attempting to reach both gay and lesbian consumers with advertising that predominantly depicts a homosexual couple, they may be incorrectly assuming that both gays and lesbians identify more strongly with their sexual identity than their gender identity and that both genders have the same type of homosexual identity.

Additionally, gender effects have often been found among heterosexuals. Prior research has found that heterosexual males have a more negative attitude toward homosexuality than do heterosexual females (Kite, 1984), and that these men have a particularly negative attitude when the target is a gay male rather than a lesbian (Gentry, 1987; Herek, 1988; Kite, 1984; Whitley, 1988). Whether heterosexual women's attitudes differ by sex of target is less

empirically clear (Gentry, 1987; Herek, 1988; Kite, 1984; Whitley, 1988). Herek (1988) suggests that sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuals and attitudinal differences based on the sex of the target can be attributed to cultural constructions of gender and their relationship with principal correlates of homophobia. Herek (1988) found that religiosity, personal contact with gay people, perceived attitudinal norms, and ideologies of family and gender were strongly correlated with attitudes toward homosexuals. Relating these findings to an examination of sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuals, Herek (1988) suggests that men and women are likely to have different experiences associated with the principal correlates of homophobia that would, in turn, lead to differences in attitudes toward homosexuals between the sexes. Extrapolating these findings to advertising, we explore the question of whether or not the effects of heterosexually- and homosexually-oriented advertising messages affect men and women of either sexual orientation differentially.

Finally, in the interest of providing the manager with options beyond just heterosexually- or homosexually-oriented advertising messages, we want to explore and test the possibility that one key to advertising to gays and lesbians within mainstream media without alienating heterosexual consumers may lie in the tenet that gayness is in the eye of the beholder. As with many subcultures, the homosexual subculture has developed markers of

gay identity such as clothes, symbols, language, and appearance that hold meaning to gays and lesbians, while creating no meaning to those who have no knowledge of the subculture (Kates, 2002; Tharp, 2001). Hence, advertisers may effectively reach both gays and lesbians in mainstream media with minimal risk of alienating heterosexuals by using homosexual iconography or symbolism. Interestingly, homosexual iconography has been employed by advertisers such as Anheuser Busch, Subaru, and Absolut Vodka in gay and lesbian media so as to communicate a sense of partnership between the firm and homosexual consumers. Subaru, for example, has placed an advertisement in gay and lesbian media that incorporates homosexual symbolism on the license plate and bumper sticker of each car so as to appeal to different types of gay and lesbian consumers and communicate how well Subaru understands the nuances of gay or lesbian identity. Given the exclusive nature of the message, the use of implicit gay and lesbian imagery has the characteristics of an "inside joke," allowing gay and lesbian consumers to feel bonded with the advertiser against less-informed mainstream adversaries. Similarly, such a strategy may allow gay and lesbian consumers to identify with the advertising as a homosexual consumer without the potential alienating effects of gender-specific homosexual imagery. Additionally, heterosexual consumers with a negative attitude toward homosexuality, making them most likely to be offended by gay and lesbian content in advertising, would be less likely to identify or understand gay iconography.

Specifically, given the discussion of prior research and its implications for this study, we hypothesize the following regarding homosexual and heterosexual consumers' responses to mainstream, homosexual, and homosexual subculture advertisements:

**Marketers targeting the homosexual market may enjoy more positive brand attitudes and/or higher levels of purchase intent than would be engendered by the same advertising messages appearing solely in gay and lesbian media.**

- H1: Heterosexuals will have a more positive attitude toward the mainstream and homosexual subculture advertisements than the homosexual advertisement.
- H2: Homosexuals will have a more positive attitude toward the homosexual and homosexual subculture advertisements than to the mainstream advertisement.
- H3: Female heterosexuals will have a more positive attitude toward the homosexual advertisement than will male heterosexuals.
- H4: Female homosexuals will have a more positive attitude to the homosexual subculture advertisement than will male homosexuals.

These hypothesized effects are illustrated in Figure 1, which presents a causal model of the effects of sexual orientation, gender, and advertising content on advertising attitudes.

**THE STUDY**

**Participants**

To address the above questions, we developed and distributed a survey to self-identified gays and lesbians in five geographic regions of the United States. These surveys were also distributed to heterosexuals in these same geographic areas so as to develop a sample of hetero-

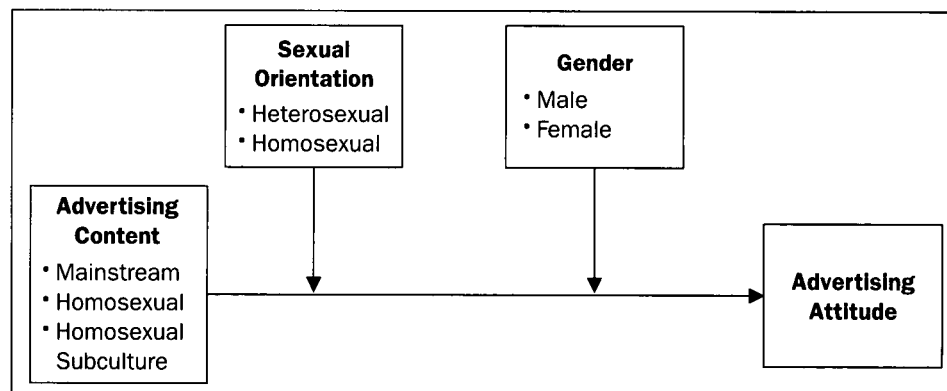
sexual participants with a broad range of attitudes toward homosexuality. Prior to proceeding, it is worth noting an important point about the sampling technique used in this study. Because homosexuals are estimated to represent only 3 to 10 percent of the U.S. population (Lukenbill, 1995), a random sampling procedure would have been unlikely to yield a balanced sample of heterosexual and homosexual participants. Furthermore, prior research has found a strong correlation between heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality and their attitudes toward advertising featuring homosexual imagery (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow, 1999). Finally, other research has shown that heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality are strongly tied to geographic lo-

cation (Herek, 1988). Therefore, to develop a balanced sample that reduced the probability of obtaining a sample skewed regarding heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality, a snowball sampling procedure was utilized for both groups of participants and was drawn from a mixture of both rural and metropolitan areas around the United States.

As a result of the above, the participants in the study included 114 self-identified homosexual adults (46 females and 68 males) and 134 heterosexual adults (74 females and 60 males) from five geographic regions of the United States. Four participants did not indicate their gender. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 68 years old with a mean age of 34 years old.

**Procedure**

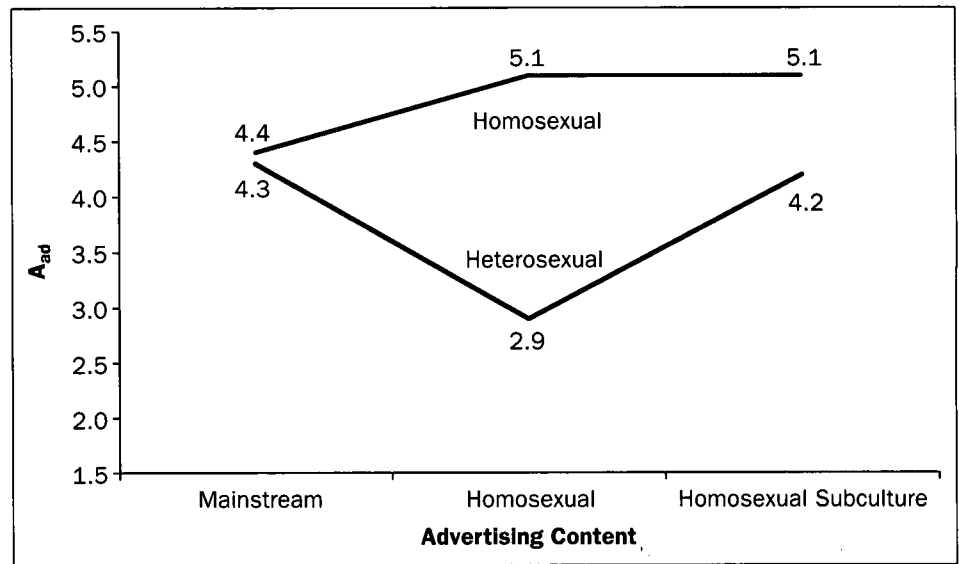
Participants were presented with four advertisements one at a time with the order of presentation randomized to control for any undesirable order effects. These target advertisements were selected based upon extensive pretesting to ensure that (a) the brands were all very familiar to the respondents, (b) the brands were all well liked by the respondents, (c) that the



**Figure 1** Proposed Model of Effects of Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Advertising Content on Attitude toward the Advertisement ( $A_{ad}$ )

people in the advertisements were all similarly attractive, and (d) that all the advertisements depicted similar levels of romantic intimacy. The heterosexual advertisement consisted of a woman sitting behind a man with her arms draped around his shoulders. The homosexual male advertisement featured two men seated closely side-by-side and embracing, while the homosexual female advertisement featured two women standing very closely and facing each other while one tenderly touches the other's face. In addition, an advertisement incorporating homosexual subcultural symbolism was used. This advertisement showed a bottle being removed from a six-pack of beer with a headline stating, "Another one coming out." In addition to this play on words, a pink triangle and a rainbow flag were featured in the advertisement to provide the gay and lesbian subcultural symbolism.

Participants were asked to review each advertisement in the order presented and to answer a three-item attitude toward the advertisement ( $A_{ad}$ ) measure accompanying each advertisement. Specific questions on a 1-to-7 semantic differential scale included: "did you think the advertisement was . . . ?" (very bad to very good), "was your reaction to the advertisement . . . ?" (very unfavorable to very favorable), and "did you like the advertisement?" (dislike very much to like very much). Having evaluated an advertisement, participants were instructed not to return to that specific advertisement. To ensure that the three gay and lesbian advertising types did not differ in terms of their perceived homosexual content, a manipulation check asked respondents for their level of agreement (1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree) with the statement: "this advertisement's content is explicitly homosexual." The survey concluded with general demographic measures including sexual orientation, age, and gender.



**Figure 2** Sexual Orientation by Advertising Type Interaction on Attitude toward the Advertisement ( $A_{ad}$ )

### Results

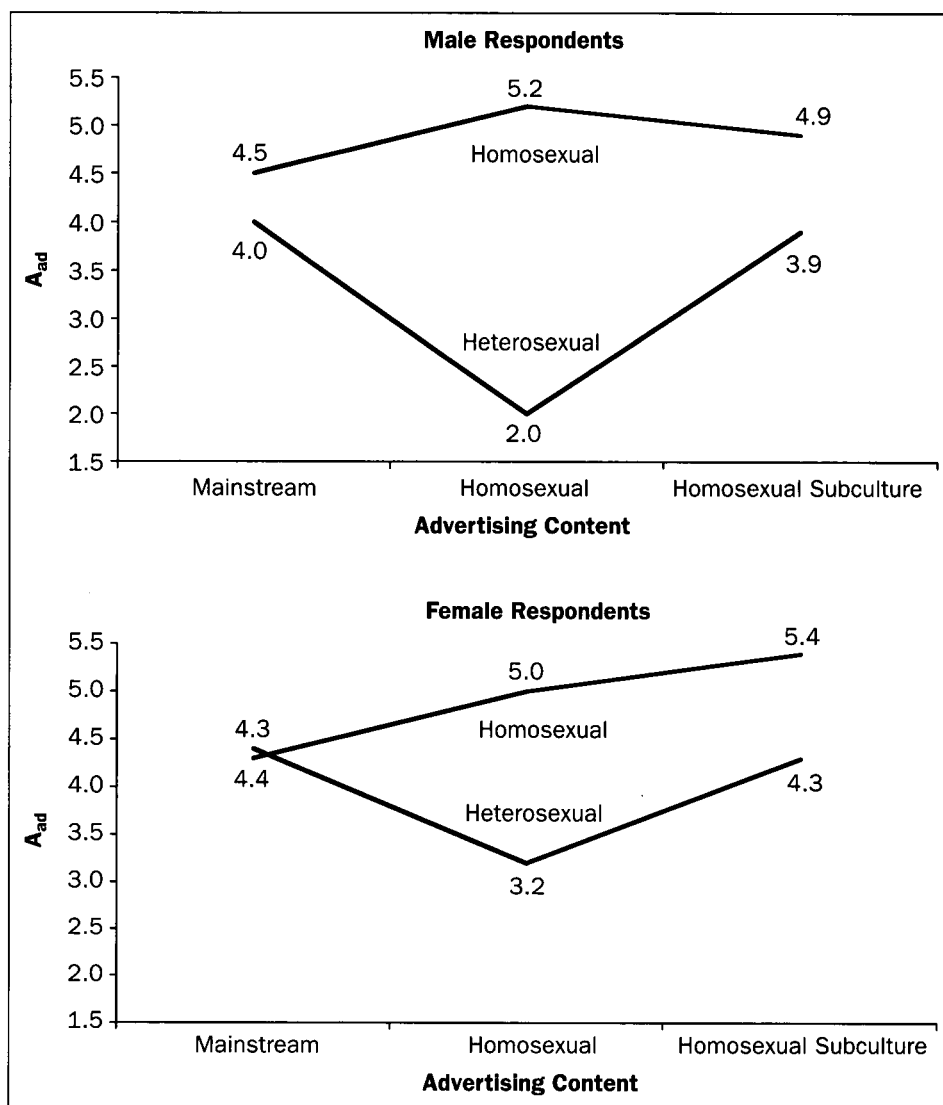
The data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with Gender (male, female) and Sexual Orientation (heterosexual, homosexual) as between-subjects factors and Advertising Content (mainstream, homosexual, homosexual subcultural) as a within-subjects factor. The dependent measure was attitude toward the advertisement ( $A_{ad}$ ), which was a composite measure of the good, favorable, and liking measures discussed in the Procedure section above. These three measures demonstrated high inter-item reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = 0.96$ . Given that marketers are unlikely to place an advertisement targeting lesbians in a male-oriented medium or an advertisement targeting gays in a female-oriented medium, we restricted our analysis of participants' responses to the homosexual advertisement to situations where male respondents saw an advertisement with a gay couple or female respondents saw the advertisement with a lesbian couple.

**Effect of sexual orientation on advertising attitudes.** To test the effects of sexual orientation on advertising attitude, a Sexual Orientation (heterosexual, homosexual) by Advertising Content (mainstream, homosexual, homosexual subculture) MANOVA was run. As expected there was a significant interaction effect of sexual orientation and advertising content on advertising attitudes ( $F_{(2,492)} = 58.06, p = 0.000$ ), which is illustrated in Figure 2. As can be seen, consistent with H1, heterosexuals reacted equally well to the mainstream and homosexual subculture advertisements (mainstream = 4.3, homosexual subculture = 4.2;  $t_{(133)} = 0.66, p = 0.509$ ), but more negatively to the homosexual advertisement (2.9) than to either mainstream ( $t_{(133)} = 11.82, p = 0.000$ ) or the homosexual subculture ( $t_{(133)} = 9.83, p = 0.000$ ) content. Conversely, consistent with H2, homosexuals reacted equally well to the homosexual and homosexual subculture advertisements (homosexual = 5.1, homosexual subculture = 5.1,  $t_{(113)} = 0.13, p = 0.894$ ), but less positively to the

mainstream advertisement (4.4) than to either the homosexual ( $t_{(113)} = 5.18, p = 0.000$ ) or the homosexual subculture ( $t_{(113)} = 4.19, p = 0.000$ ) content.

Although these results indicate that using homosexual advertising content is likely to improve advertising attitudes among homosexuals compared to mainstream advertising content (5.1 versus 4.4,  $t_{(113)} = 11.8, p = 0.000$ ), they also indicate that heterosexuals have much less positive reactions to advertisements incorporating homosexual advertising content than to mainstream advertisements (2.9 versus 4.3,  $t_{(133)} = 11.8, p = 0.000$ ). This pattern of results lends credence to the conventional wisdom that, while homosexuals might respond more favorably to advertisements incorporating homosexual advertising content, such advertisements are likely to create a negative backlash among heterosexual consumers. However, these results also support our expectations that advertisers using homosexual subculture content will increase advertising attitudes among homosexuals without undermining advertising attitudes among heterosexuals.

**Effect of sexual orientation and gender on advertising attitudes.** Having found the expected effect of sexual orientation on response to varying advertising types, we next considered whether this effect would vary as we expected by gender. To do so, we subjected our data to a Sexual Orientation (heterosexual, homosexual) by Gender (male, female) by Advertising Content (mainstream, homosexual, homosexual subculture) MANOVA. The results indicated a significant three-way interaction of sexual orientation, gender, and advertising content ( $F_{(2,488)} = 5.32, p = 0.005$ ). This interaction, illustrated in Figure 3, appears to be driven by two specific effects. First, consistent with H3, female heterosexuals responded more positively to the homosexual advertisement (3.2) than did



**Figure 3** Sexual Orientation by Gender by Advertising Type Interaction on Attitude toward the Advertisement ( $A_{ad}$ )

male heterosexuals (2.0,  $t_{(132)} = 4.46, p = 0.000$ ). As mentioned earlier, this effect was expected due to the tendency for male heterosexuals to react much more negatively to male homosexuality than female heterosexuals react to female homosexuality. Second, consistent with H4, female homosexuals reacted more favorably to the homosexual subculture advertisement (5.4) than did male homosexuals (4.9,  $t_{(112)} = 1.75, p = 0.084$ ). Again, this was expected as the imagery of a subculture advertisement may tap into a sociopolitical dimension of "what

it means to be lesbian" more than it captures the more sexual essence of "gayness" for gays (Eliason, 1996; Warren, 1974).

Therefore, although the general pattern of the overall results is replicated with each gender, we do see some subtle, yet important, differences between how each gender responds differently to a particular advertising type based on their sexual orientation.

**MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study indicate that, while managers could continue the practice of

simply running heterosexually-oriented advertisements in the mainstream print media and running homosexually-oriented advertisements in the gay and lesbian media, such a practice is suboptimal with regard to reaching the vast majority of the homosexual market who read mainstream media and will react more favorably to advertisements containing homosexually-oriented content than heterosexually-oriented content. Therefore, under the assumption that marketers would prefer to maximize their efforts toward both heterosexual and homosexual consumers, we examine the implications of our findings for creating win-win situations wherever possible.

In reaching out to the homosexual consumers, it appears that marketers have three primary options. The first is to appeal to gay and lesbian consumers by placing homosexually-oriented advertisements in traditional gay and lesbian print media such as *Out* and *The Advocate*. While this will work well for those homosexual consumers exposed to the advertising messages, such a relatively small percentage of the homosexual community consumes these media regularly, it will ultimately be ineffective at delivering the message to a large enough audience.

The second is to consider reaching homosexual consumers in mainstream media using advertisements containing homosexually-oriented content. This approach works well for the homosexual consumers, perhaps even better than running the same advertisement in a homosexual media vehicle due to the signaling of acceptance inherent in using the mainstream media. However, heterosexuals appear to react negatively to this approach, indicating that the incremental benefit among the homosexual consumer may be more than offset by losses among heterosexual consumers. While this is problematic, we do note that heterosexual males

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and females reacted differently to exposure to homosexually-oriented advertising messages with males reacting far more negatively than females. This may imply that, if the target audience is exclusively or primarily female, the downside of running homosexually-oriented advertising may be minimal, particularly because our findings indicate that homosexual females' ratings of the homosexually-oriented advertising was only somewhat below the neutral point on our 1-7 attitude measures. Furthermore, by running both heterosexually and homosexually-oriented advertisements in a rotation in these media, the marketer may be able to further offset any negative effects on the part of the heterosexual female consumer market without losing much, if anything, among homosexual females. However, it would appear that this option is far less likely to succeed if the primary audience for the advertisements is exclusively, primarily, or even substantially male. Here, the best approach appears to be to simply avoid using homosexually-oriented advertising at all.

The third option is to leverage homosexual subcultural symbolism in advertisements in the mainstream media. This approach appears to offer the best chance of creating win-win situations for the marketer. Our results indicated that heterosexuals responded equally well to both heterosexually-oriented advertisements and

advertisements containing homosexual subcultural symbolism. Furthermore, homosexuals responded positively to this approach, albeit differentially so. While homosexual males appeared to respond as positively to either approach, homosexual females responded more positively to the advertisements incorporating homosexual subcultural symbolism.

While it appears that, overall, this option offers the best chance for creating win-win advertising messages for both the heterosexual and homosexual consumer markets, it is important to note that for many product categories, particularly those based on a strong link to romance, intimacy, or sexuality, use of homosexual subcultural symbolism may not be as effective as using homosexually-oriented content. In these cases, marketers may need to incorporate somewhat of a straddling strategy in which heterosexually-oriented advertisements are run in the mainstream media and homosexually-oriented advertisements are run in homosexual media. In this case, they can hope that the higher positive responses of the minority of the homosexual market that consumes the homosexual media will have a positive spill-over effect, via word of mouth, on the larger homosexual consumer base. However, we would point out again that the effects of homosexually-oriented advertising messages seems to

affect heterosexual males and females differentially, thereby indicating that some homosexually-oriented advertising content may be tolerated in cases where the audience is exclusively or primarily female. Ultimately, it appears that marketers interested in maximizing their success among both heterosexual and homosexual consumer have more options than might have been previously recognized. Hopefully, as more marketers reach out to the homosexual consumer, we will all learn more about how different advertising and targeting strategies work with both heterosexual and homosexual consumers. **JAR**

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