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The moderating role of religiosity on nonprofit advertising ☆

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofits need to compete for donations now more than ever. Maintaining a socially responsible reputation and developing ads that are emotional and likable are tactics used to encourage donations. This study explores the role of religiosity as a moderator of antecedents to intent to donate to the nonprofit sponsor of pro-social ads and finds that religiosity acts as a moderator in the relationship between liking of the ad, perceived corporate social responsibility of the nonprofit, and intent to donate to the nonprofit. Managerial implications suggest that nonprofits employing negative emotional appeals in advertising should (1) feature real victims (not actors) to generate empathy and (2) target more religious individuals through demographic and psychographic segmentations.

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations have grown from 12,000 in 1940 (Boris, 1999) to over 1.5 million by 2010 (Urban Institute, 2010) and must compete against other nonprofits for donations. Message tactics chosen by these organizations influence the way the public responds to nonprofit messages (Keller & Lehmann, 2008) designed to increase donation intent. Nonprofit marketing therefore resembles marketing for profits in the need to understand both antecedents to the proclivity to donate to a particular nonprofit and the moderating variables that may strengthen the relationships between these antecedents and donation intent.

The marketing literature primarily treats religiosity as either a categorical demographic variable or on rare occasion as a direct effect on a dependent variable. Yet, in the non-marketing literature both mediating (Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, Yahaya, & Chai, 2011) and moderating (Momtaz, Ibrahim, Hamid, & Yahaya, 2010) effects of religiosity on other variables have been tested and shown to exist. For instance, religiosity mediates the psychological well-being of widowed elderly people (Momtaz et al., 2011), so a higher degree of religiosity lessens the negative effects of widowhood, and religiosity moderates the relationship between social isolation and psychological well-being (Momtaz et al., 2010). Were religiosity found to play a similar moderating role on nonprofit advertising, this would be an important finding for both academic research and practitioners.

2. The consequences of not knowing a religion's role on consumers' reactions to advertising

Because of a strong relationship between religious persons and a greater concern for maintaining high moral standards (Wiebe & Fleck, 1980), marketers must understand the role religion plays in consumers' reactions to advertising. With advertising often pushing the moral envelope to jockey for the public's share of mind, marketers run the risk of offending stakeholders, particularly those with high moral standards. Further, the public may expect non-profit firms to hold to a higher moral standard in advertising than they expect profit-oriented firms.

Hirschman (1983) finds that religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish) shapes attitudes toward products and services. However, marketing messages impact more than just Christians and Jews. Muslims also respond strongly to advertising based on their religious tenets. For example, studies by Luqmani, Yavas, and Quraeshi (1987) and Michell and Al-Mossawi (1999) find that a failure to understand Islam in relation to advertising strategies results in an alienation of a wide segment of the conservative Saudi public. Differences in how devout versus lenient Muslims respond to perceived controversial elements in advertisements suggests a need to match creative execution and message content to society's socio-cultural environment (Peebles & Ryans, 1984), in particular where religion plays an important role for target segments. Failure to do so alienates the public and generates a negative attitude toward the advertisement and brand recall (Gardner, 1985; Zinkhan & Martin, 1982).

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The more religious a person, the more likely that person will be offended by the advertising of controversial products (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004). Ardent religious people tend to be more conservative, have a greater concern for moral standards and possess more traditional attitudes (Barton & Vaughan, 1976; Wiebe & Fleck, 1980; Wilkes, Burnett, & Howell, 1986). Products such as cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives and underwear (Barnes & Dotson, 1990; Rehman & Brooks, 1987; Shao, 1993) represent just some of the controversial products that can offend very religious people. Wilson and West (1981) describe categories of controversial products and services including products (birth control, drugs for assisted suicide), services (abortion, artificial insemination), and concepts (political ideas and palliative care). The list provided by Wilson and West (1981) demonstrates a potential problem for nonprofits—in fact any entity targeting the general population some of their products/service/concepts will offend certain segments of the population based upon religious tenets. Therefore, marketers need to develop an understanding of consumers' potential reaction to advertising in order to mitigate the potentially harmful consequences of offending the public.

3. Framework and variables in the study

Prior research identifies a number of variables that act as direct or indirect antecedents to increase intent to donate to a nonprofit sponsor of an ad intended to affect pro-social change. These variables include negative emotional response to the ad, social responsibility of the sponsor, and attitude toward the ad (Shanahan & Hopkins, 2007).

This study operationalizes affective response to the nonprofit ad as negative emotional response, an approach that is both intuitive and supported by the literature. A perusal of much of the advertising used by nonprofits to promote pro-social change indicates that stimulating an emotional response from the public is a consistent priority. From the haunting music of Sarah McClachlin coupled with tortured animals, to images of starving children needing just pennies a day to survive, nonprofits employ images to generate sadness, compassion and empathy; all identified as negative emotional appeals.

Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor (1987) suggest that people exposed to emotion laden advertising organize their emotions into two categories, both positive and negative, where negative emotions include anger, sadness, and fear (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). The negative state relief model (Baumann, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 1981) indicates that negative emotions drive individuals to reduce their negative feeling by supporting the advertised cause (i.e., donations). A strong link between attitude toward the ad and nonprofit donations (Brown & Stayman, 1992; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1987) suggests but does not test a direct relationship between overall attitude toward the ad and perceived social responsibility of the sponsor. However, overall attitude toward the ad appears to directly influence increased intention to donate to the nonprofit and indirectly influence through the perceived social responsibility of the sponsor.

Many nonprofits promote pro-social activities to affect positive societal change for the betterment of the public. Why? Because, acting in a socially responsible manner appears to have a positive effect on nonprofit donations (Brown & Stayman, 1992; MacKenzie et al., 1987) supporting a solid link between social responsibility and intent to donate.

4. Religiosity

This study focuses on one aspect of religious beliefs – theism or the belief in an omnipotent God – a facet of the Religious Practices and Attitudes Inventory (RPAI) developed by D'Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, and Spilka (1999), D'Onofrio, Murelle, et al. (1999). The RPAI views religiosity on a continuum from atheist/agnostic to devotional and is strongly tied to another well studied continuum—Hofstede's (1988) individualism/collectivism scale. Hofstede (1988) defines individualism as a focus on rights over duties, a concern for oneself, personal autonomy, and self-fulfillment. Conversely, deeply religious people focus on community, a concern for others beyond themselves, and duty to God; often rejecting self-gratification in favor of self denial and abstinence. Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) suggest that individualism values personal goals and personal control with social goals playing a lesser role (Triandis, 1995).

A century ago Durkheim posited that religion and society support one another. Religion offers society a public normative set of acceptable behaviors (Durkheim, Cosman, & Cladis, 2001). Objects of worship exist for the mutual consumption by members of a collective or group. Religion offers the collective a system of ideas and symbols around which and through which members of a collective group interact. Thus, most religion is by definition collectivist (with the exception of some Eastern religions such as Buddhism).

The core element of collectivism binds and mutually obligates individuals as groups (Oyserman et al., 2002). In-groups, not individuals, are the basic unit of measure and include religious groups (Hui, 1988). Triandis (1995) further adds that collectivism may refer to a broad range of values and behaviors, well beyond that of the individual. Oyserman (1993) offers that the goals of collectivism include sacrifice for the common good and that life satisfaction derives from carrying out social roles and obligations.

These descriptions suggest that more religious individuals tend to perceive that they have a duty to others, are willing to sacrifice to help the greater good (tithing, donating to charity), and will look favorably on the good works of others to mitigate what can be seen as sinful behaviors (smoking, drinking, drug use etc.). Consequently, upon exposure to nonprofit pro-social change-based ads (those depicting the results of drunk driving or smoking), high religiosity groups will exhibit a stronger emotional reaction, maintain a stronger view of social responsibility in the sponsor who is trying to nudge society in a manner consistent with their beliefs, and an increased proclivity to donate to those nonprofits.

H1. The high religiosity group has a stronger negative emotional response to nonprofit pro-social change ads than does the low religiosity group.

H2. The high religiosity group has a more positive attitude toward the ad than does the low religiosity group.

H3. The high religiosity group perceives greater social responsibility of the sponsor than does the low religiosity group.

H4. The high religiosity group has greater intent to donate than the low religiosity group.

In addition to a direct effect of religiosity on the variables in the study, religiosity will moderate the relationships between the variables. For high religious groups, messages promoting smoking cessation or anti-drunk driving messages resonate strongly based on group beliefs. For low religious groups that tend to be more individualistic, such messages may be seen as an intrusion of their rights: they can take care of themselves without others' interference. Because the basic traits of the high religious group are about social obligation, and for some evangelical message delivery, the nonprofit message seems familiar and welcome. As such, the link between an ad that is liked, a sponsor that is seen as doing their mission, and donations to that nonprofit will be stronger than for low religious groups.

H5. The high religiosity group has a stronger relationship between negative emotional response and perceived social responsibility of the sponsor than the low religiosity group.

H6. The high religiosity group has a stronger relationship between negative emotional response and overall attitude toward the ad than does the low religiosity group.