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Targeting without alienating on the Internet: Ethnic minority and majority consumers

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ABSTRACT

The authors draw on the phenomenon of processing fluency to develop a memory-based account of target and nontarget market effects related to consumer evaluations of culture-specific website designs. The test of the study's hypotheses relies on longitudinal experimental data from Tunisian minority and French majority consumers in France. The psychological mechanisms that drive website evaluations appear to differ for the two populations. French majority consumers are alienated by culturally incongruent website design, but this negative effect is alleviated by repeated exposure. Tunisian minority consumers tend to prefer website design with a French look and feel, and repeated exposure enhances this effect. The results from an explorative post hoc study echo these findings and suggest that effects of culture-specific website design on consumer website evaluations are contingent on the website product category.

1. Introduction

Marketplaces worldwide are increasing in ethnic and cultural diversity of consumers. This creates a challenging situation for marketers who must rethink their targeting strategies (Grinstein and Nisan, 2009; Holland and Gentry, 1999). An identifiable stream of research on "targeting without alienating" (Johnson and Grier, 2011) therefore tackles whether and when targeting ethnic minority and majority consumers with culture-specific advertising makes good business sense. Studies show that culture-specific advertising can generate unfavorable reactions in some consumers who consider that they are not being targeted or may feel alienated (Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier, 2000; Torres, 2007). However, such evidence remains inconclusive (Johnson and Grier, 2011). Some investigators report that cultural or ethnical (dis)similarities between the ad and the viewer do not account for variations in consumer responses to the ad (Aaker et al., 2000; Antioco, Vanhamme, Hardy, and Bernardin, 2012; Brumbaugh, 2009; Karande, 2005; Lee, Fernandez, and Martin, 2002) or that consumers may prefer ads that are culturally dissimilar to themselves over culturally similar ones (Brumbaugh, 2002).

To contribute to this debate the authors examine ethnic minority and majority consumers' evaluations of website cultural congruity (WCC). A website has high WCC when it displays cultural markers of a target culture in terms of typical colors, symbols, heroes, or rituals (Bartikowski and Singh, 2014; Cho and Cheon, 2005; Luna and Gupta, 2001; Luna, Peracchio, and De Juan, 2002). The authors propose a memory-based account of WCC effects in which they differentiate two dimensions of processing fluency: conceptual and perceptual. The test of the hypotheses relies on longitudinal experimental data from Tunisian minority and French majority consumers in France. Johnson and Grier (2011, p. 253) call France an "ideal multicultural marketing laboratory for targeting without alienating" because of the particular context that favors integration of immigrants and imposes cultural assimilation.

The study complements and extends previous research in several ways. First, it offers insights into target and nontarget market effects of culture-specific website design. A large body of research almost concordantly suggests that consumers respond positively to higher levels of WCC, but no study tests these effects for ethnic minority consumers. Such insights are particularly relevant because of the increasing importance of the Internet to reach ethnic minority consumers (Becerra and Korgaonkar, 2010). Moreover, nontarget market websites are just one click away and can be easily reached by members of both ethnic minority and majority consumers. Second, the study offers new insights beyond what is known on the psychological processes that drive ethnic minority and majority consumer evaluations of culture-specific marketing communication. Extant studies use cross-sectional designs and emphasize the important role of cultural memory to explain target and nontarget market effects (Aaker et al., 2000; Antioco et al., 2012; Brumbaugh, 2002; Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999; Johnson and Grier,

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2011). However, no study manipulates this memory experimentally. Therefore, by considering two dimensions of processing fluency and testing the theoretical model with longitudinal data, the authors respond to Brumbaugh's (2002) call for more research on alternative modes of processing of culturally targeted marketing communication. Third, by focusing on WCC as a central variable, the current study broadens the scope of previous research that used models with different ethnicities to study target and nontarget market effects (Antioco et al., 2012; Johnson and Grier, 2011; Karande, 2005; Lee et al., 2002). Hence, the authors heed Johnson and Grier's (2011) suggestion to examine other cultural cues, such as culturally typical symbols or material objects. Finally, the authors explore the findings from their experimental study in a qualitative post hoc test. The results echo the importance of considering repeated exposure or habituation effects and suggest that effects of culture-specific website design on consumer website evaluations are contingent on the website product category.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Targeting ethnic minority consumers on the web

Does marketing communication across cultures involve "the same accommodation issues when it is directed at national sub-cultural groups, as it does when directed at cultural groups across national borders" (Holland & Gentry, 1999, p. 68)? If yes, then the bulk of extant research into culture-specific website design suggests that higher levels of WCC improve consumer website evaluations in terms of perceived website usefulness, ease of use, attitudes toward the site, as well as use or purchasing intentions (Baack and Singh, 2007; Cyr, 2008; Lynch and Beck, 2001; Singh, Fassott, Chao, and Hoffmann, 2006; Singh, Furrer, and Ostinelli, 2004; Vyncke and Brengman, 2010).

These studies do not only share remarkably similar results but also they resonate regarding countries or geographical regions as cultural units and make implicit assumptions about cultural homogeneity within nations. In particular the globalization literature suggests the inappropriateness of consumer segmentation in terms of countries (Cleveland, Erdoğan, Arıkan, and Poyraz, 2011; Cleveland and Laroche, 2007; Watson, Lysonski, Gillan, and Raymore, 2002). Ongoing globalization and rising migration make it "increasingly difficult to identify the 'ethnie' core of a culture due to cultural contamination" (Craig & Douglas, 2006, p. 323). Ethnic minority consumers are broadly diffused among majority populations and share cultural bonds with both, members of their own ethnic culture and members of the host culture (Jamal, 2003; Jamal and Sharifuddin, 2014). Their expectations and cultural values may be best understood in terms of amalgams of ethnic and host-country cultures, habits, and traditions. Thus, designing websites to effectively target ethnic minority consumers is unlikely as simple as recycling websites that have been designed to target them in their home countries.

2.2. Processing fluency

To portray a theoretical framework for explaining WCC effects, the authors draw on the processing fluency phenomenon, which according to Alter and Oppenheimer (2009, p. 219) is a "ubiquitous metacognitive cue in reasoning and social judgment". Processing fluency is "the ease with which information flows through the cognitive system" (Reber, 2012, p. 223). Greater levels of fluency lead to higher levels of affect, preferences, and perceptions of truth (Reber and Schwarz, 1999), as well as to favorable physiological reactions, such as the activation of the zygomaticus major muscle, the so-called smiling muscle (Winkielman and Cacioppo, 2001). For example, Alter and Oppenheimer (2006) show that shares from companies with more fluent or easy-to-pronounce company names or ticker codes (e.g., KAR versus RDO) perform significantly better on the stock exchange during the week following initial public offering. On the contrary, less fluent processing leads to more negative reactions. Processing fluency can be conceptual or perceptual in nature (Hang and Auty, 2011; Lee and Labroo, 2004).

Conceptual fluency is the ease with which a stimulus comes to mind and pertains to the processing of meaning through semantic associations (Hamann and Squire, 1996). Higher conceptual fluency affects the formation of brand consideration sets and is positively related to affective judgments and choice decisions (Lee, 2002; Lee and Labroo, 2004; Nedungadi, 1990). One of the earliest demonstrations of conceptual- or retrieval-based fluency is Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) "availability heuristic", which posits that things are perceived as more important and believable when people can think about them and associate meaning to them. Accordingly, Martindale, Moore, and Borkum (1990) show that the subjective perception of meaningfulness of a visual stimulus counts solely as the dominant reason explaining an individual's liking of the stimulus. Similarly, Hamann and Squire (1996) show priming effects in tasks in which relationships between studied items and test cues are conceptual (semantic or associative) rather than perceptual, suggesting that positive attitudinal judgments emerge when a stimulus's meaning can be easily grasped and associated with what has been learned in the past. In this sense, cultural knowledge is explicit memory that shapes cognitive evaluations of culturally laden stimuli (Aaker et al., 2000; Brumbaugh, 2002; Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999; Johnson and Grier, 2011).

However, perceptual fluency is the ease with which consumers identify a target stimulus on subsequent encounters (Bornstein, 1989; Jacoby and Dallas, 1981). Zajonc (1968, p. 15) states that "mere exposure is a sufficient condition for attitude enhancement". Repeated stimulus exposure can enhance ease of processing, render stimuli more accessible in memory, and facilitate recognition (Whittlesea, Jacoby, and Girard, 1990; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, and Reber, 2003). For example, Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc (1980) showed study participants meaningless geometric shapes and found that liking of shapes increased as a function of (simple) exposure frequency. Repeated encounters with a stimulus can facilitate stimulus processing even without conscious awareness of the previous experience (Schacter, 1987; Whittlesea, 1993) and lead to an "illusion-of-truth effect", meaning that people are more likely to believe what they have heard or seen before (Reber and Schwarz, 1999). Indeed, advertising research has repeatedly shown that even a single repeated exposure can significantly enhance consumer liking of the ad or the brand (Anand and Sternthal, 1990; Tellis, 1997).

Differentiating conceptual from perceptual fluency extends previous studies that offer cognitive explanations of WCC effects, such as Luna et al.'s (2002) theory of cognitive resource matching or Singh et al.'s (2006) usability and usefulness account of culturally adapted web content. It also extends previous studies that explain target and nontarget market effects of culture-specific marketing communication based on similarity perceptions between the viewer and the ad (Aaker et al., 2000; Antioco et al., 2012; Brumbaugh, 2002; Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999; Johnson and Grier, 2011). Hence, the argument the present study attempts to advance is that WCC affects consumer website evaluations not only through conscious cognitive processing but also through habituation or unconscious processing that may emerge from repeated website exposure. Considering repeated exposure is also practically highly relevant. For example, consumers who do price or product comparisons frequently surf the same websites again, whether they liked them or not on a first exposure.

Notably, fluency effects exist independently of one's cultural values or felt ethnic identity (Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley, and Eyre, 2007). Memory-based difficulties in understanding cultural content, or nonfluent processing, generally functions as a cognitive alarm that triggers senses of risk and concern. For example, Rubin, Paolini, and Crisp (2010) show that a bias against immigrants exists simply because immigrants do not belong to a salient category of people and are therefore more difficult to process cognitively — independently of the evaluator's

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