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Unintended Effects of Targeted Advertisements: A Test on Sarawakian Chinese

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of targeted advertising is to transmit a message from a sender directly to an intended, pre-chosen, and segmented audience who should prefer the targeted communication and respond favorably towards it. However, there is always the potential for other non-targeted groups to view the advertisement. Unintended consequences such as negative attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions may occur. This article tests these effects based on relevant theories in the communication and advertising literature on a distinct non-dominant ethnic group (Chinese) in Sarawak, Malaysia. The study utilizes questionnaires based on a fictitious advertisement. The findings suggest that there are negative attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions by those not targeted who see these advertisements.

Keywords: *Sarawak, ethnically targeted advertisements, Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT)*

Introduction

It has been well accepted by practitioners and academics that segmenting markets and targeting specific customer groups is the basis of effective marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994). Theory posits that if products can be differentiated to cater for the needs of specific groups, their perceived superior quality will command higher prices and generate more repeat purchases with less advertising, thus lowering costs and boosting profits (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994; Samiee & Roth, 1992; Von der Fehr & Stevik, 1998). Nonetheless, when companies advertise to a specific market, there is always the possibility that others may see it (Barnard & Ehrenberg, 1997; Pollay, 1986).

The one main characteristic of advertising is that it is a form of mass communication (Barnard & Ehrenberg, 1997; Pollay, 1986). Advertising utilizes mass media and therefore cannot be limited in order that it is only seen by those who a business wants it to be seen by, even if it is placed in specific targeted media (Cornwell, 1994; Ringold, 1995). It is also well accepted that different

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consumers will look at an advertisement differently and develop their own shared reactions and interpretation (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Scott, 1994). The varied meanings derived from the same message results from individuals' efforts to create order in their own lives thus resulting in unintended effects for the company (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979; Kelly, 1955; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956).

Two types of unintended effects have been identified. The first type consists of any negative reactions by and consequences for those whom the advertisement specifically targets (Crain, 2002; Goldberg & Gorn, 1978; Preston, 1999; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 1998). The second type consist of negative reactions by and consequences for those not targeted but who may have seen advertisements that target other groups (Preston, 1999; Rotfled, 1999).

This research explores the issue of unintended effects by assessing the reactions of a specific ethnic group to ethnically targeted advertisements that target them or others. It utilizes a major non-dominant ethnic group (Chinese). The study uses a sample of consumers who were exposed to ethnically targeted advertisements (Chinese, Iban, Malay) for a fictitious soft drink. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first discussion of the relevant literature is presented; then the methodology of the study and its findings; and finally academic and managerial implications, limitations, and areas for future research are discussed.

Literature Review

Chinese in Malaysia

The research is conducted in the context of advertisements that fully target a particular ethnic group (Chinese). Advertisements can target any group of people, who may be segmented by ethnicity, demographics, socio-economic variables, psychographics, or a combination of various factors (Solomon, 1999). Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country in South East Asia. It has a population of 23.27 million, where the majority of the population is Malay (50%), followed by Chinese (26%) and Indians (7.7%) (Anonymous, 2001).

The Chinese in Malaysia are mainly descendants of immigrants from the southern coastal provinces of China (Lee & Tan, 2000; Nazaruddin, Ma'rof, Asnarulkhadi, & Ismail, 2001). The Chinese tend to be urban, but are nearly everywhere, in town and village alike (Purcell, 1965). In 1957, there was 2,332,963 Chinese (37.1%) in Malaysia (Nazaruddin et al., 2001) and while the number has increased, the percentage is now at around 26%. Mandarin is the written and spoken language learnt at school but there are numerous spoken dialect groups (Lee & Tan, 2000). The Chinese have been economically dominant in the commercial sector (Andaya & Andaya, 1982; Chew, 1941; Mardiana, 2000), with

daily contact with other races for trade purposes (Purcell, 1965). They are followers of various religions and practice endogamy (Asmah, 1983; Hodder, 1959; Purcell, 1965).

Targeted Advertising and the Speech Accommodation Theory

Advertising has been defined as a paid, mass-mediated attempt to persuade (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2003). Humans possess the only tool that makes social construction of reality possible, language. The reality and meaning of an advertisement is conveyed by the visual imagery, language used and the culture portrayed (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993). There are two views as to how this occurs; the mapping view and the reality-construction view (Grace, 1987). The reality-construction view came into prominence through the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf identified that there are links between language, thought and culture (Whorf, 1941). This has been extended into the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, where language is seen as playing a role in making the world understood and interpreted (Holmes, 1992). The schemas, by which the world is known and understood, are also the schemas by which advertisements are understood (Whorf, 1956). This hypothesis suggests that each culture's language acts as a prism that we use to make sense of the world (Berger, 1995).

The Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) is used to study the effects of targeted advertising. The SAT places importance on the sender and how the receiver of the message views the sender as well as the message (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). The SAT or, as some have renamed it Communications Accommodation Theory or just Accommodation Theory, has become quite popular in research in recent years (Bell, 1991; Lipski, 1985; Montgomery, 1988; Roslow & Nicholls, 1996),

There have been a considerable number of empirical studies into the effects of targeting ethnic groups and their reactions to ethnically targeted advertisements. The findings suggest that ethnic self-awareness moderates consumer response to targeted advertising (Forehand & Deshpande, 2001) and is significant to how advertising is perceived (Shaffer & O'Hara, 1995) and purchased (Donthu & Cherian, 1994); (Pollay, Lee & Carter-Whitney, 1992). Consumers also perceived advertisers differently based on the language they used in advertisements (Koslow, Shamdasani & Touchstone, 1994). Differences in reactions by the dominant and non-dominant groups (either numerically or culturally) have also been noted (Brumbaugh, 2002; Deshpande & Stayman, 1994; Grier & Deshpande, 2001; Tan & Farley, 1987). Other studies have noted that certain product categories lent themselves well to being targeted to ethnic groups, as they were more culturally sensitive (Webster, 1994). Nevertheless, the use of mass media to target ethnic groups has been questioned, as this is more suitable for a broad appeal rather than a targeted one (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1997).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is seen as crucial in examining and understanding the functioning and viability of most contemporary societies including multi-cultural societies like Malaysia (Abraham, 1999). Ethnicity refers to the way people are grouped together by their language, custom, religion, race and territory (UNRISD, 1999). In Malaysia, race (thus ethnicity for the government) is viewed as a biological concept, though most sociologists would disagree with this (Shanklin, 1993) and would argue that this is a social and political classification.

Various authors have raised questions as to how ethnicity should be defined (Burton, 1996; Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986; Hui, Laroche, & Kim, 1998). Since (Weber, 1961) pioneering work on ethnicity, there has been much confusion over its constructs. It is agreed, at a basic level, in sociology and anthropology, that ethnicity is a concept that refers to the character or quality encompassing various indicators that are used to assign people to groups (Gordon, 1964). Ethnicity is more than just paternity, but also patrimony (the legacy of collectivity) and phenomenology (the meaning people attach to their descent as members of a collectivity) (Fishman, 1977a, 1977b). Ethnic identity is a concept that is answered by the questions "What am I?" and "What am I not?" (Aboud & Christian, 1979; Brand, Ruiz, & Padilla, 1974). It is a concept that refers to who a person is (Dashefsky & Shapiro, 1974; Frideres & Goldenberg, 1982) and is one of the many aspects in the identity of a person (Frideres & Goldenberg, 1982). Interestingly, past studies have found that ethnic identity will tell a person the correctness of one's actions and at the same time allow for one to assess the correctness of an outsider's behavior (Frideres & Goldenberg, 1982). This is the reason for asking respondents for their reactions to a company that has produced ethnically targeted advertising in this thesis.

It has been shown in previous research that members of a non-dominant group are socialized into both their culture and the dominant culture (Brumbaugh, 1995). Therefore both their own schema and the dominant schema affect how a non-dominant group (Chinese) reacts to an advertisement.

Proposition

This then leads to the following propositions that set out to determine the unintended consequences of a targeted advertisement. The targeted advertisements that were tested were the Chinese, Iban and Malay language advertisements.

P_1: Ethnic groups not targeted will have more negative emotional reactions than those targeted;

P_2: Ethnic groups not targeted will have more negative attitudes toward the advertisement than those targeted;

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P_3: Ethnic groups not targeted will have more negative attitudes toward the company than those targeted;

P_4: Ethnic groups not targeted will be less likely to purchase the product than those targeted;

P_5: Ethnic groups not targeted will be less likely to recommend the product than those targeted.

Methodology

Initially pre-tests were carried out for the advertisement design and the measures to be used. A factorial design was created and a survey employed to obtain responses from Chinese respondents throughout the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. The sample sizes in cells in the manipulation tables were in the range of 76 to 83.

A fictitious soft drink was chosen as the product to be used in the advertisement as it met the requirements of familiarity and salience to respondents. It also met the study requirement of an ethnically neutral product (a product that could be viewed by everyone in an emotionally neutral manner) and low involvement. This was to avoid the compounding effects that may result from using a real brand and company and to minimize the compounding effects that could result from a high involvement product.

The advertisement was specifically designed to be concise and to the point, with minimal use of text and visual elements that may distract the viewer from the objective of the advertisement of targeting a specific ethnic group. The creative guidelines were based on Koslow et al. (1994) stimulus material construction. The advertisement included a picture of a can of soft drink, which was named "One," a slogan, a short message, the price of the drink and the company details. The slogan was "Taste the sensation" and the message was "Try our newest flavor today" which appeared next to the picture of the can. The price statement initially was "Just RM1.60" and placed either under the picture of the can or next to it. The company contact details were placed at the bottom of the advertisement. The designer translated the advertising copy into Chinese, Iban and Malay.

A questionnaire was designed with had a cover letter on the first page followed by one of the advertisements detailed in Appendix 1. Each respondent only viewed one advertisement. The measurements used are detailed in Table 1 and the measurements were presented in random order.

Findings

Table 2 provides a profile of the respondents while Table 3 provides the Mean and Standard Deviation for each variable by the advertisement type seen by the respondents. A summary of the GLM findings is presented in Table 4.

Table 1: Summary of Sources of Key Measurement Scales

Measure	Author	No. of Items	Scale Range	No. of Factors	Reliability	Validity	Scale Type
Emotion – Alienation	(Touchstone, Homer, & Koslow, 1999)	2	1 - 9	-	0.6#	No	L
Anger		3			0.74		
Racism		2			0.47#		
Target of the Advertisement		3			0.51		
Threatened by the Advertisement		3			0.73		
Attitude Toward Advertisement	(Henthorne, LaTour & Nataraajan, 1993)	6	1 - 4	-	0.77	No	B
Affect Towards the Advertisement	(Walker & Dubitsky, 1994)	1	1 - 5	-	-	No	L
Attitude Toward the Company in the Advertisement	(Peterson, Wilson, & Brown, 1992)	3	1 - 5	-	0.91	No	B
	(Simard, Taylor, & Giles, 1976)	2	-	-	-	-	-
Corporate Credibility	(Newell & Goldsmith, 2001)	8	1 - 7	2	0.77 to 0.91	Yes*	L+
Rapport	(Crook & Booth, 1997)	14	1 - 7	1	0.96	Yes**	L
Corporate Image	(Annan, 1999)	22	1 - 5	6	0.70 to 0.88	Yes**	B++
	(Spencer, 1999)	14	1 – 5	3	0.87	Yes**	L
Purchase Intention	(Maheswaran & Sternthal, 1990)	1	1 - 7	-	-	No	L
Word of Mouth	(Becker & Kaldenberg, 2000)	1	1 - 5	-	-	No	L

* = Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis, ** = Exploratory Factor Analysis, + = Likert Scale, ++ = Bi-polar Scale, # = Pearson correlations coefficient alpha.

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Table 2: Respondents Profile

	Factor	Chinese
N		392
Gender (%)	Male	42.6
	Female	57.4
Age Scale (%)	17 – 19	7.9
	20 –29	49.7
	30 – 39	27.0
	40 – 49	13.3
	50 – 59	2.0
	60 – 69	0
Highest Level of Education	No Formal Education	.5
Achieved (%)	Primary School	.5
	Secondary School	61.2
	Diploma	23.5
	Degree	13.5
	Postgraduate	.8
Ethnic Identification (%)	Strongly disagree	.5
	Mildly disagree	2.8
	Disagree	11.0
	Neutral	16.3
	Mildly Agree	30.4
	Agree	29.1
	Strongly agree	9.9

Table 3: Means by Advertisement Type

Ad Type	Iban			Malay			Chinese		
Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Emotions - Alienation	76	4.14	1.01	79	3.85	1.03	83	3.61	1.09
Emotions - Anger	76	3.72	1.04	79	3.49	1.03	83	3.57	1.03
Emotions - Racism	76	4.04	1.17	79	3.95	1.27	83	3.89	1.32
Emotions - Targeted by Ad	76	3.21	1.17	79	3.80	0.83	83	5.22	1.44
Emotions - Threatened by Ad	76	3.61	1.08	79	3.46	1.04	83	3.57	0.97
Att tow the Ad	76	3.49	0.98	79	3.78	0.94	83	3.88	0.84
Affect tow the Ad	76	3.12	1.65	79	3.08	1.75	83	3.39	1.54
Att tow Co. in the Ad	76	3.46	1.07	79	3.52	0.85	83	3.53	0.96
Corporate Credibility	76	3.40	0.88	79	3.63	0.77	83	3.60	0.93
Rapport with the Co.	76	3.44	0.93	79	3.68	0.66	83	3.63	0.84
Corporate Image	76	3.26	1.02	79	3.41	0.98	83	3.56	0.97
Purchase Intention	76	3.72	1.49	79	3.62	1.10	83	3.73	1.41
Positive Word of Mouth	76	3.24	1.44	79	3.22	1.45	83	3.55	1.37

Table 4: GLM Results by Advertisement Type

Ad Type / Variable	Iban		Malay	
	F	Sig	F	Sig
Emotions - Alienation	*10.004*	*.002*	1.950	.165
Emotions - Anger	.776	.380	.274	.601
Emotions - Racism	.599	.440	.098	.755
Emotions - Targeted by Ad	*90.876*	*.000*	57.789	*.000*
Emotions - Threatened by Ad	.058	.809	.486	.487
Att tow the Ad	*7.558*	*.007*	.555	.458
Affect tow the Ad	1.112	.293	1.426	.234
Att tow Co. in the Ad	.189	.664	.003	.955
Corporate Credibility	1.979	.161	.029	.865
Rapport with the Co.	1.907	.169	.150	.699
Corporate Image	3.587	.060	.912	.341
Purchase Intention	.002	.961	.329	.567
Positive Word of Mouth	2.022	.157	.2342	.128

Discussion and Implications

The context and method chosen to test the model and propositions may have a bearing on the findings. This paper uses ethnically targeted advertising in a Malaysian context. Effects from the different ethnic groups' social hierarchies and Malaysian social situation may have an impact on the findings. It is therefore important to understand the situation in Malaysia in order to interpret and evaluate the findings.

In Malaysia, advertisements using various languages and language mixes are extensively shown on television, depicted in print, or spoken over the radio. Therefore, there is a level of awareness and an acceptance of different languages used in advertising. It would not be a surprise to a Malaysian to see an all-Chinese language advertisement on television or print. Therefore the possibility of someone from a particular ethnic group seeing a different language advertisement is quite high. Malaysia is a plural society (Furnivall, 1948) and not a melting pot of ethnic groups. Due to this separateness, there is a push towards integration by education and integration activities such as uncoupling the bonds of nationality and culture (Dijkstra, Geuijen & de Ruijter, 2001; Watson, 1980). Nevertheless, Malaysian Chinese have a clearly different language and culture to Malay and Iban and a large percentage of the population (Andaya & Andaya, 1982; Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 1999; Lee & Tan, 2000; Mardiana, 2000; Platt, 1981). This makes them distinct and therefore likely to react differently, to the targeted advertisements.

The findings indicate support for the cultural schema theory where a non-dominant ethnic group is aware of its own cultural schema, as well as that of the

dominant schema but not of other non-dominant ethnic groups (Brumbaugh, 2002). The Chinese are also aware of their group membership and the social power held by Malays and therefore react accordingly (Depret & Fiske, 1993; Deschamps, 1982). This awareness allows the non-dominant group to act within social norms and expectations. It is also possible that another driving force here is the unity movement created by the government to create integration between the races that emphasizes the use of Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) (Anonymous, 2000).

On the other hand, Chinese respondents had some limited negative emotional reactions to the Iban language advertisements. The negative emotional reactions and attitude towards the advertisement were not accompanied by negative attitudes to the company, though (Refer to Table 4). Again this supports the cultural schema theory, that they would not have the other non-dominant ethnic group's cultural schema and should react according to the stereotype or sociotype that they hold of the other group (Katz & Braly, 1933; Triandis, 1994). Although marketers should take notice of the stereotype, or sociotype, that other groups hold about the targeted group, this must be weighed against the group's relative ethnic dominance.

The results support findings from previous studies that targeted advertisements can generate negative emotions among those not targeted (Koslow et al., 1994; Touchstone et al., 1999). It is also shown to translate to dislike of the advertisement but interestingly not to the point of behavior (WOM or Purchase Intention).

It is argued that a targeted communications' strategy is the most effective method of communicating with a specific ethnic group (Hecht et al., 1993; Kinra, 1997; Kumar, 2002). However, in a plural society such as Malaysia, targeted communications may cause unintended problems. The findings indicate that there will be negative emotional and attitudinal reactions by those not targeted. This raises questions about the effectiveness of culturally targeted advertisement campaigns in general.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine the effects of ethnically targeted advertising on a non-dominant ethnic group, the Chinese of Sarawak, towards advertisements that targeted them or other ethnic groups. Reactions that were assessed were emotions, attitude to the advertisement, attitude to the company and behavioral intentions with varying results. Notably, respondents reacted negatively towards Iban targeted advertisements for emotions and attitude towards the advertisement. Respondent's reactions towards Malay targeted advertisements were not significant.

The reactions of non-targeted groups that view targeted advertisements may not seem an important issue to many marketing academics and practitioners and has generally been neglected by scholars. Nevertheless, previous studies have shown that unintended audiences often view an advertisement targeted at other groups and make decisions regarding the advertisement, brand and company behind the advertising. These decisions may affect future consumer behavior. Thus, this study seeks to add to the body of marketing knowledge about the unintended effects of targeted advertising.

The implications of this study are still minimal yet it allows for some thought. Academicians will do well to not wholeheartedly support targeted advertising without noting the caveats introduced here. Practitioners on the other hand should look at the impact of their targeted advertising on the whole business enterprise, noting other ethnic groups' views.

Limitation

The research employed a convenient sampling method. This form of data collection limits the generalizability of the findings yet does not diminish its importance. The advertisement used was also fictitious. This was because the author did not wish for past perceptions to be tied into the reactions of the respondents. The study is perceptual and therefore any replications may not discover similar findings. The personal dimensions that are particular to the Chinese respondents here are numerous and involve many psychological, cultural, and social aspects that may not be replicated. However, as an attempt to understand the reactions, this paper allows for further exploration.

Future Research

Future research could look into the possibility of utilizing a proper sampling frame and allowing for generalizability. Other studies could also be carried out by using real life advertisements. Studies could also look into other aspects of targeting, aside from advertisement.

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Appendix 1: Advertisement Used