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The perceptions of consumers aged 18-30 of “lesbian” appeals in advertising

ABSTRACT

In an over-saturated market, advertisements have become more risqué as companies vie for consumer attention and lesbian content in advertising seems to be on the increase in mainstream media. This article attempts to discover whether lesbian content in advertising elicits positive or negative consumer attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand, and to link these attitudes with the intention to purchase the product. By doing so, marketers will be able to ascertain whether this type of advertising appeal is effective or whether it offends consumers and therefore decreases product sales.

The study was quantitative in nature and used descriptive research in a field setting. It was found that there is a significant correlation between tolerance of homosexuality and acceptance of lesbian content in advertising. In addition, these advertisements attracted attention and interest and were not perceived as particularly immoral, exploitive or offensive by most of the sample population. In terms of attracting attention and interest, and being memorable to consumers, advertisements containing clear lesbian interaction are more effective than those with lower levels of homoerotic tension.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Though venturing into the mainstream with gay subject matter remains a sensitive area, marketers are testing the waters as gays themselves have become more prominent in society" (Wilke & Applebaum, 2001:25). Television shows such as *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* have allowed homosexual characters to become routine fare and marketers are beginning to reach a level of comfort too. Yin (2003:18) asserts, "gay consumers have more disposable income and free time than the general population – not a small consideration in a down market." Oakenfull and Greenlee (2004:1276) describe the gay and lesbian consumer market as the "Dream Market", citing an above average disposable income and a willingness to spend as supportive arguments.

The challenge for advertisers and marketers is how to target the homosexual market in mainstream publications without offending heterosexual consumers. On the other hand, the emergence of gay and lesbian content in advertising may just be a new evolution of the old advertising cliché of "sex sells", and a new sub-category of the sexual appeal in advertising. The use of lesbian imagery in advertising may be a new shock tactic in a media vying for consumer attention.

This study used quantitative research to evaluate the effect of lesbian content in advertisements on consumers, both heterosexual and homosexual. The main problem examined is whether lesbian content in advertising elicits positive or negative attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand. The research determines the extent of consumer alienation experienced by using lesbian imagery in advertising and examines the relationship between positive attitudes towards an advertisement and purchase intent. The study also examines the relationship between people's tolerance of homosexuality in society and their opinion of the favourability of the advertisements containing lesbian imagery.

2. ADVERTISING AS A TOOL IN THE IMC MIX

Belch and Belch (2001:14) expanded the marketing communications mix to describe the tools available for Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) as:

- Sales promotion
- Publicity/public relations
- Personal selling
- Advertising
- Direct marketing
- Interactive/Internet marketing

By making use of the IMC tools, marketers need to persuade the consumer not only to buy a product, but also that the product they are offering is the best in its product class. Advertising is probably the most well known and visible of the tools available to the marketer.

Advertising constitutes any form of paid-for, non-personal communication about an organisation, product, service or idea of any identified sponsor (Dirksen & Kroeger, 1968:55; Belch & Belch, 2001:15). This communication intends to aid the sale of, or draw attention to, a product, service or company directly or indirectly. Advertising encompasses the following:

- Magazine and newspaper advertising
- Movie and television advertising
- Outdoor advertisements (posters, signs, billboards, skywriting)
- Direct mail
- Shop signage
- Radio advertising
- Catalogues
- Internet advertising
- SMS advertising
- Other non-personal promotional techniques

Advertising is normally tailored to a selected target audience or market, taking into account their demographic, psychographic and geographic characteristics. Bothma (2003:76) writes that advertising is but one part of an organisation's integrated marketing communication mix and that advertising should attempt to support the other promotional elements. He highlights the importance of integrating advertising objectives with marketing objectives. Du Plessis (2003:5) states that, traditionally, advertising has been the most recognised form of marketing communications due to its high visibility. Du Plessis (2003:9) also writes that we find ourselves in an era of relationship-building where personalisation is a critical element in marketing.

3. THE USE OF ADVERTISING APPEALS

Due to the paid-for nature of advertising, the content and placement thereof can be completely controlled by the sponsor. The effectiveness of advertising on consumers is based on the advertiser's use of advertising appeals. These appeals attract consumers and entice them to action. Lucas and Benson (1985:71) state that the appeal of an advertisement should arouse a desire in the consumer to gratify some need, whether articulated or not. The imagery and content of the advertisement are linked to natural tendencies and desires, although the advertisement itself may hold little resemblance to the base need to which it appeals.

Lucas and Benson (1985:71) divide advertising appeals into two broad categories: those that appeal to personal needs and those that appeal to objective needs (see Table 1). Personal needs can further be divided into individual and social needs. Personal topics may relate the product to the reader's individual or social welfare, whereas objective appeals display goods and lay chief emphasis on the product without reference to the reader.

Personal		Objective
<i>Individual</i>	<i>Social</i>	
Appetite – taste	Popularity	Quality – size
Success – power	Sex – mating – parental	Beauty – appearance
Possession	Rivalry	Price
Wealth – independence	Domination – submission	Prestige – age of business
Beauty	Conformity and distinction	Recommendations and testimonials
Cleanliness	Sociability – hospitality	
Health	Co-operative or altruistic	
Comfort		
Play		
Fear avoidance		

Table 1: Subjects of appeal

4. THE USE OF SEXUAL APPEALS IN ADVERTISING

Of all the appeals, the use of sexual appeals and nudity in advertising has received the most criticism for being in bad taste. These techniques are often used to gain the attention of consumers, and are often not relevant to the product being advertised. Even when the sexual appeal relates directly to the product, many people object both to nudity in advertising and to sexually suggestive adverts (Belch & Belch, 2001:771). According to Dudley (1999:89) the portrayal of women in advertisements as sex objects, in dependent positions or as incompetent, is an area of particular concern. Women in general and feminists in particular have expressed considerable dissatisfaction with these stereotypes over the years.

Belch, Belch and Villareal (in Reichert, 2001:9) define sex in advertising or sexual appeals as varying degrees of female nudity. Sexual appeals are, however, not limited to female nudity and may include:

- Male nudity
- Physical proximity and sexual tension between heterosexual couples or groups
- Physical proximity and sexual tension between members of the same sex
- Suggestive messages in the image or text
- Symbolism, such as phallic or sexually suggestive symbols

A study by Alexander and Judd (in LaTour & Henthorne, 1993) concluded that while nudity and erotic content have been found generally to increase attention to the advertisement, they typically do not enhance recall or positive feelings towards the product. On the contrary, Dudley (1999:94) found that “increasing levels of nudity significantly affected

attitudes towards the advertisement itself, the company, and the respondents' interest in trying/buying the product". Although increasing levels of nudity were perceived as more offensive and more exploitive, these perceptions were not particularly strong. On the other hand, nudity resulted in more attention-getting, interest, an appealing advertisement, and a more distinctive brand. The most provocative finding was that the use of a nude model was more favourably rated than the use of a topless model.

5. THE EMERGENCE OF HOMOSEXUAL APPEALS IN ADVERTISING

The homosexual appeal, as a subset of the sexual appeal, is fairly new in advertising. Homosexual appeals can be divided into two broad categories: those containing men (or "gay appeals") and those containing women (or "lesbian appeals"). Currently, male homoerotic images, especially blatant ones, seem to be fairly rare, while those containing females are far more popular. Reichert (2001:9) refers to the lesbian appeal in advertising as "lesbian chic" imagery.

By using homosexual appeals, companies face the possibility of eliciting negative reactions from people who are hostile towards gays and lesbians (Messaris, 1996:259; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2004:1277). To eliminate this possibility, most homosexual appeals are structured in such a way that they will appeal to homosexual consumers without alienating heterosexual consumers (Cortese, 1999:39). The adverts are designed so that heterosexual consumers will probably not even notice the homosexual appeal in the advertisement. These advertisements make use of subtle images or messages intended for the homosexual market, which are derived from the unique coded language, coded behaviour and non-verbal displays that homosexuals have created, due to the historical stigma attached to being homosexual. According to Messaris (1996:260), the ambiguity involved in lesbian appeals may be a matter of clothing, body posture or other aspects of physical appearance, but it may also involve physical contact between two women. When it comes to men's imagery, sexual ambiguity is most often signalled by appearance only, since non-aggressive physical contact between men is more tightly circumscribed by public norms.

Bauer and Greyser (1968:197) point out that there are three basic factors that may cause people to like or dislike a particular advertisement. These are the product that is advertised, the particular information that the advertisement conveys about the product, and the advertisement itself, which may be perceived as pleasant or unpleasant. People were found to react favourably to advertisements that they considered informative (they felt they learnt something from the advertisement) or enjoyable. Advertisements to which individuals reacted unfavourably were found to be annoying or offensive.

Lucas and Benson (1985:97) state that there is no universally recognised standard of values for the many different appeals used in advertising. The value of any specific appeal is dependent upon a number of factors, the largest of which is the kind of goods represented or the product being advertised. Since an appeal is an attempt to motivate, the relative potency of various human desires is the fundamental key to the strength of appeals. On a scale of relative strength, sex attraction is rated fourth, with a relative score of 7,9 out of 10, after appetite and hunger, love of offspring and health (Lucas & Benson, 1985:98).

6. LESBIAN CHIC APPEALS

Lesbian chic appeals in advertisements include two or more women with varying degrees of sexual tension between them. These appeals can be categorised based upon the degree of erotic or sexual tension depicted. Though many of these images do not contain graphic portrayals of lesbian sex, they exemplify what Ellenzweig (in Reichert, 2001:9) describes as homoerotic images that depict desire and affection between members of the same sex, with an erotic tension.

The categories into which these lesbian chic advertisements can be divided are:

- Low degree of homoerotic tension (as used in advertisement 1 of this study)
- High degree of homoerotic tension (as used in advertisement 2 of this study)
- Clear lesbian interaction (as used in advertisement 3 of this study)

The low degree of homoerotic tension is exemplified by the eroticism of the image being barely discernable (advertisement 1), while those with a high degree of homoerotic tension are unmistakably erotic images (advertisement 2) (Reichert, 2001:9). The third category has a clear lesbian or sexual interaction between the women (advertisement 3) and does not rely on homoerotic tension, but rather involves a graphic portrayal of same sex interaction.

The portrayal of lesbian chic images is arguably more closely aligned to femme-on-femme images in male-oriented erotica than a representation of "real" lesbians (Reichert, Maly & Zavoina, 1999, in Reichert, 2001:9). As a result, these images of "new lesbianism" have less to do with lesbians and lesbian reality and more to do with voyeurism, in the sense of men viewing women for pleasure. The women used in advertisements are used for their sexual appeal and not for their likeness, to or representation, of real-life lesbians. Reichert (2001:9, 12) quotes Inness (1997), who is herself a lesbian, as she notes "in the Cosmo world, the lesbian is white, beautiful, financially successful, young and well dressed".

The marketing director of Young Designers' Emporium, Samuel Coleman (in Rubin, 2003:68), who recently used a lesbian chic advertisement, explains that "fashion advertising has gone way past showing off a nice shirt or even a covetous lifestyle to create sales. It's about creating an emotive response that inspires you to buy into the brand".

Men and women's perceptions of advertising and interpretation of its content vary. Men tend to infer homoerotic tension between women in advertisements more easily than women do. Women, instead, see the women in the advertisements as close friends, unable to get a man or merely experimenting, but not as lesbians (Reichert, 2001:19). Oakenfull and Greenlee (2004:1284) write that the key to targeting gays and lesbians without alienating unintended audiences is to use subtle lesbian imagery in the advertisements. This study aims to undertake further research of the effect of gender on perceptions of lesbianism in advertising, while simultaneously investigating the effect of sexual preference as well as homosexual tolerance.

7. EVALUATION OF LESBIAN CHIC APPEALS IN ADVERTISING

Due to a lack of previous research into advertising featuring homosexual imagery (Oakenfull & Greenlee 2004:1277) state that the topic has received very little attention in academic literature), a large portion of this section is based on research into nudity or sexual appeals in advertising. Many of the techniques are those used in research into controversial or offensive advertising.

Data permitting direct measurement of the sales effects of sexually oriented advertisements is generally unavailable, so research studies have relied on communication measures to evaluate the effectiveness of using sex in advertising (Courtney & Whipple, 1984:111).

As human beings, people seek to maintain a state of mental 'consonance' or equilibrium. Anything that disturbs this causes 'dissonance' because it upsets the patterns of knowledge (cognitions) that the person has learned to find acceptable. In order to avoid dissonance, information that is inconsistent with the existing pattern will be rejected (Wilmschurst, 1993:206). The concept of cognitive dissonance may explain an individual's reaction towards lesbianism in advertising, as this is not a topic that is traditionally found acceptable.

In a study on nudity in advertising, conducted by Dudley (1999:93), the five facets examined were: evaluation of the advertisement itself, evaluation of the brand, evaluation of the company, the offensive – exploitive dimension and intent to purchase the brand. This allowed Dudley (1999) to gauge the effect that varying degrees of nudity had on consumers' perceptions of the advertisement, brand, company, offensiveness and intent to purchase, thus allowing the positive or negative effects on the consumer of nudity in advertising to be evaluated. By following a similar approach in this study, the researchers were able to draw correlations between the degree of homoerotic tension in advertising using lesbian appeals and consumer perceptions of the advertisement, degree of offensiveness and intent to purchase the product. This study did not examine consumer evaluation of the brand or the company.

To understand how heterosexual consumers interpret lesbian chic advertisements, Reichert (2001:12) elicited responses, based on three such advertisements from same-sex focus groups. The participants were asked four qualitative, open-ended questions, in which they were asked to describe what was going on in the pictures between the women, what their opinions and feelings were about the advertisements, what they thought the advertisers were trying to communicate with the particular advertisements and who the people in the advertisements were and what their relationship was. During this process, it was found that women are less likely than men to infer homoerotic tension between the women. This may differ when people's sexual preferences are taken into account.

Bhat, Leigh and Wardlow (1998) found strong evidence that homosexual imagery elicits disapproving emotions from heterosexuals corresponding to their attitude towards homosexuality. Their study was conducted using gay male imagery. This is theoretically

important because it demonstrates that consumers may react emotionally and negatively to advertising when its imagery is inconsistent with their prejudices. Bhat, Leigh and Wardlow (1998) further found in their study that consumers had a more muted reaction to homosexual images in a fashion advertisement (jeans) than in an advertisement for shampoo. They theorised that this may be due to the traditional progressive and "cutting edge" themes found in fashion advertising, including homosexuality. They also discovered, though, that the initial shock and displeasure at viewing a controversial advertising campaign may dissipate over time.

Hence, advertisers are advised to consider the nature of all associations that consumers have with their brands, including product category associations, before embarking on an advertising campaign, and especially before considering a provocative campaign.

8. HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

Hypothesis 1

There is a significant positive correlation between individuals' tolerance of homosexuality and their attitudes towards lesbian content in an advertisement.

Hypothesis 2

Homosexual males would have a higher interest in a brand shown in an advertisement with a clear lesbian content than heterosexual males.

Hypothesis 3a

Heterosexual consumers would have a more favourable attitude towards an advertisement depicting a high degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 2) than towards an advertisement depicting a clear lesbian interaction (such as advertisement 3).

Hypothesis 3b

Homosexual respondents would have a more favourable attitude towards an advertisement containing a high degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 2) than an advertisement containing a low degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 1).

9. METHODOLOGY

9.1 Sampling

The target population consisted of men and women, aged between 18 and 30, in the Pretoria area. Respondents were selected through a combination of convenience sampling (for heterosexual respondents) and snowball sampling (for homosexual respondents).

The fieldworker attempted to recruit an equal number of heterosexual and homosexual respondents. A total of 107 usable questionnaires were completed. The demographic profile of respondents is summarised in Table 2.

9.2 Data collection

Data was collected during personal interviews with the respondents. The fieldworker introduced himself to a respondent, explained the purpose of the study and then requested the respondent to complete an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire. The fieldworker was available to answer questions and clarify any uncertainties. Because of the sensitive and potentially embarrassing nature of the research topic, the respondents were approached on their own to prevent group influences.

9.3 Measurement

The respondents were shown three A4-sized full-colour advertisements for a fictitious fashion brand. The advertisements were digitally scanned from local fashion magazines and were professionally edited to include a fictitious brand logo. The advertisements contained no text. Female models in the advertisements depicted three different lesbian appeals that could be described as:

- A low degree of homoerotic tension (advertisement 1)
- A high level of homoerotic tension (advertisement 2)
- A clear lesbian interaction (advertisement 3)

The respondents viewed the advertisements and then answered questions measuring the following constructs:

9.3.1 *Perceived relationship between the models*

To ascertain what relationship respondents perceived between the female models in each of the three advertisements, they were asked to select multiple options from a choice of seven possibilities describing the relationship between the models (see Table 3). This data was also used to determine the respondent's inference of homoerotic tension in each advertisement.

9.3.2 *Attitude towards the test advertisements*

The respondents' attitudes towards the test advertisements were measured with an eight-item, five-point Likert-type scale. The scale end-points were anchored as strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). Items 3, 4, 6 and 8 were reverse scored so that a higher mean score indicates a more positive attitude towards the advertisement (see Table 4).

Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability of the eight items in the attitude scale. The alpha values were 0.76, 0.75 and 0.78 for advertisements 1, 2 and 3 respectively. This indicates that the three attitude scales have acceptable internal consistency reliability.

Next, a total attitude score was calculated for each advertisement as the mean across all the responses given to all the items in the particular attitude scale. These overall attitude scores are also shown in Table 4.

9.3.3 Brand interest

The respondents' interest in the brand was measured for each advertisement with a three-item, five-point Likert-type scale. The scale end-points were anchored as strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The items were scored so that a higher mean score indicates higher levels of interest in the brand (see Table 6).

A reliability analysis indicated that Cronbach's alpha for the brand interest scales were 0.85, 0.86 and 0.88 for advertisements 1, 2 and 3 respectively. This indicates that the three brand interest scales have an acceptable internal consistency reliability.

A total brand interest score was calculated for each advertisement as the mean across all the responses given to all the items in the particular brand interest scale. These total scores are shown in Table 6.

9.3.4 Influence of advertisement on the brand

The respondents were asked to indicate which advertisement made the brand appear distinctive, desirable, of a high quality and appealing (see Table 7).

9.3.5 Tolerance of homosexuality

The respondents' tolerance of homosexuality was measured on an eight-item, five-point Likert-type scale (see Table 8). The scale end-points were anchored as strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The items were scored so that a higher mean score indicates a higher tolerance of homosexuality.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha of the tolerance of homosexuality scale was 0.93, which indicates that the scale has acceptable internal consistency reliability.

9.3.6 Demographic variables

The questionnaire also contained questions to determine a respondent's age, gender and sexual orientation (see Table 2).

10. FINDINGS

10.1 Descriptive statistics

10.1.1 Respondent profile

Table 2 contains demographic data for the 107 respondents who participated in the study:

Demographic variable	Response options	Percentages	
Age	18-24	75%	
	25-30	25%	
Gender	Male	53%	
	Female	47%	
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	65%	
	Homosexual	24%	35%
	Bisexual	11%	

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents (n = 107)

The homosexual and bisexual respondents were combined into a single category for this study. This combination resulted in a total of 38 homosexual consumers and a split of 65% heterosexual and 35% homosexual respondents.

10.1.2 Perceived relationship between the models

To ascertain what relationship respondents perceived between the female models in each of the three advertisements, the respondents were asked to select multiple options from a choice of seven possibilities (see Table 3). This data was also used to determine the respondent’s inference of homoerotic tension in each advertisement.

Relationship	Advertisement 1 Low homoerotic tension		Advertisement 2 High homoerotic tension		Advertisement 3 Clear lesbian interaction	
	Percentage	Number of mentions	Percentage	Number of mentions	Percentage	Number of mentions
Friends	34%	54	3%	5	4%	7
Attracted to each other	17%	27	36%	66	21%	41
Lovers	8%	12	31%	56	43%	85
Formal relationship	1%	2	6%	11	10%	19
Experimenting	14%	22	17%	31	22%	43
Family	8%	13	1%	1	0%	0
No relationship	17%	27	6%	11	1%	2
Total	100%	157	100%	181	100%	187

Table 3: Inference of sexual tension (n = 107)

Table 3 indicates the number of mentions made by the respondents regarding the relationship between the models in each of the advertisements. The number of mentions for each relationship type was then divided by the total number of mentions per advertisement to obtain a percentage figure.

The 107 respondents predominantly described the women in advertisement 1 (low homoerotic appeal) as being friends (54 mentions or 34% of all the mentions made about this advertisement), having no relationship (27 mentions; 17%), being attracted to one another (27 mentions; 17%) and experimenting (22 mentions; 14%).

The women in advertisement 2 (high homoerotic appeal) were predominantly described as attracted to one another (66 mentions; 36%) and lovers (56 mentions; 31%) and experimenting (31 mentions; 17%). This indicates that the respondents noticed a higher level of homoerotic appeal in advertisement 2 than in 1.

The models in advertisement 3 were predominantly described as lovers (85 mentions; 43%), experimenting (43 mentions; 22%) and attracted to one another (41 mentions; 21%). This indicates that the respondents noticed a higher level of homoerotic appeal in advertisement 3 than in 1 and 2.

10.1.3 Attitude towards the test advertisements

Table 4 indicates the respondents' attitudes towards each advertisement based on the attitude measures included in the questionnaire. A higher mean score indicates a more positive attitude towards the advertisement.

<i>Measures</i>	Advertisement 1 Low homoerotic tension		Advertisement 2 High homoerotic tension		Advertisement 3 Clear lesbian interaction	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
1. Is appealing	3.79	1.10	3.21	1.20	3.30	1.42
2. Gets attention	4.21	0.94	4.06	0.97	4.50	0.93
3. Is unethical (r)	1.83	1.04	2.03	1.02	2.11	1.11
4. Is exploitive (r)	2.17	1.16	2.38	1.17	2.53	1.36
5. Is interesting	3.63	1.03	3.44	1.18	3.78	1.27
6. Is immoral (r)	1.66	1.05	1.86	1.04	2.04	1.18
7. Is memorable	3.18	1.12	3.38	1.20	3.99	1.20
8. Is offensive (r)	1.42	0.87	1.71	1.06	1.88	1.17
Total attitude score	3.96	0.64	3.76	0.67	3.88	0.75

(r) *Items were reverse scored*

Table 4: Attitude towards the advertisements (n = 105 – 107)

Overall, the respondents had the most positive attitude towards advertisement 1 (low degree of homoerotic tension), followed by advertisement 2 (high homoerotic tension) and advertisement 3 (clear lesbian interaction).

Advertisement 3 (clear lesbian interaction) was seen as receiving the most attention, and being the most interesting and the most memorable. It was, however, also considered to be the most unethical, most exploitive, most immoral and most offensive of the advertisements.

Table 5 shows the mean total attitude scores of homosexual and heterosexual respondents towards the three advertisements. The standard deviations are also provided. Sub-group differences should be compared with caution because of the small cell sizes.

Sexual orientation	Gender	n		Advert 1	Advert 2	Advert 3
Heterosexual	Female	39	Mean	3.76	3.47	3.58
			Std. dev.	0.66	0.57	0.60
	Male	30	Mean	3.98	3.68	3.86
			Std. dev.	0.68	0.66	0.79
	Total	69	Mean	3.85	3.56	3.70
			Std. dev.	0.67	0.62	0.70
Homosexual	Female	18	Mean	4.36	4.25	4.36
			Std. dev.	0.44	0.59	0.76
	Male	20	Mean	3.99	4.03	4.04
			Std. dev.	0.52	0.61	0.72
	Total	38	Mean	4.16	4.13	4.19
			Std. dev.	0.51	0.60	0.75

Table 5: Total attitude scores of homosexual and heterosexual respondents for the three advertisements

10.1.4 Brand interest

The respondents’ brand interest scores are summarised in Table 6.

Measures	Advertisement 1 Low homoerotic tension		Advertisement 2 High homoerotic tension		Advertisement 3 Clear lesbian interaction	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Makes me want to try the brand	3.11	1.23	2.73	1.22	2.67	1.25
2. Makes me want to buy the brand	3.10	1.12	2.74	1.15	2.55	1.15
3. Makes me want to search for the brand	2.22	1.11	2.04	1.03	2.12	1.16
Total interest score	2.81	1.02	2.50	1.00	2.45	1.06

Table 6: Brand interest (n = 105 – 107)

This table indicates that advertisement 1 (low homoerotic appeal) is associated with the highest total brand interest score, followed by advertisements 2 and 3.

10.1.5 Influence of advertisement on the brand

This section deals with the impact that the advertisements had on the respondents' views of the brand in terms of distinctiveness, desirability, quality and appeal. The respondents were asked to indicate which one of the three advertisements portrayed these attributes the best. Table 7 summarises the findings in this regard.

Brand characteristic	Percentage of respondents who chose ...		
	Advertisement 1 Low homoerotic tension	Advertisement 2 High homoerotic tension	Advertisement 3 Clear lesbian interaction
Distinctiveness	50%	19%	31%
Desirability	49%	21%	30%
Quality	85%	12%	3%
Appeal	62%	20%	18%

Table 7: The percentage of respondents who indicated that a specific advertisement best represents the brand in terms of distinctiveness, desirability, quality and appeal (n = 104 – 105)

The descriptive findings summarised in Table 7 suggest that advertisement 1 (portraying a low degree of homoerotic tension) appears to be the best method to make the brand appear distinctive, desirable and appealing. Thus the advertisement with the low degree of homoerotic tension appears to appeal to the largest audience.

10.1.6 Tolerance of homosexuality

A correlation between the respondents' tolerance of homosexuality and their attitudes towards the advertisements was expected. The items listed in Table 8 were used to determine the respondents' tolerance towards male and female homosexuality. A higher mean score indicates a higher tolerance of homosexuality.

Scale items	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Sex between men is just plain wrong. (r)	3.30	1.67
2. Male homosexuals are disgusting. (r)	3.65	1.58
3. Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men.	3.06	1.57
4. Male homosexuality is a perversion. (r)	3.80	1.44
Tolerance towards male homosexuality	3.44	1.33
5. Sex between women is just plain wrong. (r)	3.82	1.54
6. Lesbians are disgusting. (r)	3.97	1.46
7. Female homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in women.	3.41	1.51
8. Female homosexuality is a perversion. (r)	4.03	1.38
Tolerance towards female homosexuality	3.80	1.28
Total tolerance score	3.62	1.24

(r) Items were reverse scored

Table 8: Tolerance of homosexuality (n = 105 – 107)

The fact that the means on all four questions regarding female homosexuality are higher than the means of the questions regarding male homosexuality suggests that the respondents are more tolerant of female homosexuality than of male homosexuality.

Table 9 shows the mean total tolerance scores of homosexual and heterosexual respondents. As expected, the mean tolerance levels of homosexual respondents is higher than that of heterosexual respondents.

	n	Mean	Standard deviation
Heterosexual	69	3.08	1.21
Homosexual	38	4.60	0.50
Total	107	3.62	1.25

Table 9: Tolerance of homosexuality levels of homosexual and heterosexual respondents

10.2 Inferential statistics

10.2.1 Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that there is a significant positive correlation between individuals’ tolerance of homosexuality and their attitudes towards lesbian content in an advertisement.

This directional (one-tailed) hypothesis was tested separately for the three advertisements using a non-parametric Spearman’s rank order correlation. This test was chosen because a series of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests and the visual inspection of histograms and normal probability plots indicated that the test variables – i.e. tolerance of homosexuality and attitude towards the three test advertisements – were not normally distributed.

The correlations between tolerance of homosexuality and attitudes towards the three test advertisements are shown in Table 10.

Advertisement	Correlation coefficient
Advertisement 1	0.326
Advertisement 2	0.563
Advertisement 3	0.514

a In all cases, the one-tailed $p < 0.001$.

Table 10: Spearman’s rank order correlations between tolerance of homosexuality and attitude towards the three test advertisements (n = 107)

In all three cases, a significant positive correlation was found between tolerance of homosexuality and attitude towards each of the three test advertisements. The strongest correlation was found in the case of advertisement 2 depicting a high level of homoerotic tension. Hypothesis 1 is therefore accepted.

10.2.2 Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 stated that homosexual males would have a higher interest in a brand shown in an advertisement with a clear lesbian content than heterosexual males.

Table 10 shows the mean brand interest scores of homosexual and heterosexual males with regard to advertisement 3 (clear lesbian interaction). The associated medians and standard deviations are also indicated.

Group	n	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Heterosexual males	29	2.34	2.33	1.10
Homosexual males	20	2.65	2.50	1.13

Table 11: Descriptive statistics for hypothesis 2

This directional (one-tailed) hypothesis was tested for advertisement 3 using a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test. This test was used because of the small sub-group sizes and because graphical and statistical tests for normality indicated that the test variable – i.e. brand interest – did not have a normal distribution in the heterosexual male subgroup.

The results of the test (Mann Whitney U statistic = 223.50, 1-tailed p-value = 0.134) indicate that hypothesis 2 cannot be accepted. Therefore, homosexual males do not have a significantly higher interest in a brand shown in an advertisement with a clear lesbian content than heterosexual males.

10.2.3 Hypothesis 3a

Hypothesis 3a stated that heterosexual consumers would have a more favourable attitude towards an advertisement depicting a high degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 2) than towards an advertisement depicting a clear lesbian interaction (such as advertisement 3).

Table 11 shows the mean attitude scores of heterosexual respondents towards advertisements 2 (high degree of homoerotic tension) and 3 (clear lesbian interaction). The associated medians and standard deviations are also indicated.

	Mean	Median	Std. deviation
Advertisement 2 (High degree of homoerotic tension)	2.34	2.33	1.10
Advertisement 3 (Clear lesbian interaction)	2.65	2.50	1.13

Table 12: Descriptive statistics for hypothesis 2 (n = 69)

This directional (one-tailed) hypothesis was tested using a paired samples t-test to compare the mean attitude scores of heterosexual respondents to advertisements 2 (depicting a high degree of homoerotic tension) and 3 (depicting a clear lesbian interaction). This test was used because graphical and statistical tests for normality indicated that the test variable – i.e. the differences between the two attitude scores – only deviated slightly from normality. Since the paired-samples t-test is robust for small deviations from normality, it was regarded as appropriate.

The results of the test (t statistic = -2.448, df = 68, 1-tailed p-value = 0.99) indicate that hypothesis 3a cannot be accepted. The descriptive statistics in Table 12 suggest that the reverse situation applies. Heterosexual respondents have a more favourable attitude towards advertisement 3; the advertisement containing the clear lesbian appeal (t statistic = -2.448, df = 68, 1-tailed p-value = 0.009).

10.2.4 Hypothesis 3b

Hypothesis 3b stated that homosexual respondents would have a more favourable attitude towards an advertisement containing a high degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 2) than an advertisement containing a low degree of homoerotic tension (such as advertisement 1).

Table 13 shows the mean attitude scores of homosexual respondents towards advertisements 1 (low degree of homoerotic tension) and 2 (high degree of homoerotic tension). The associated medians and standard deviations are also indicated.

	Mean	Median	Std. deviation
Advertisement 1 (Low degree of homoerotic tension)	4.16	4.25	0.51
Advertisement 2 (High degree of homoerotic tension)	4.13	4.25	0.60

Table 13: Descriptive statistics for hypothesis 2 (n = 38)

This directional (one-tailed) hypothesis was tested using a paired samples t-test to compare the mean attitude scores of homosexual respondents to advertisements 1 (depicting a low degree of homoerotic tension) and 2 (depicting a high degree of homoerotic tension). This test was used because graphical and statistical tests for normality indicated that the test variable – i.e. the differences between the two attitude scores – only deviated slightly from normality. Since the paired-samples t-test is robust for small deviations from normality, it was regarded as appropriate.

The results of the test (t statistic = 0.453, df = 37, 1-tailed p-value = 0.673) indicate that hypothesis 3b cannot be accepted.

11. LIMITATIONS

Due to a limited budget, sample advertisements could not be made and advertisements from local fashion magazines were used. Although the brand names were replaced with a fictitious name, the models, clothing and design of the advertisements may have influenced the respondents' attitudes towards the advertisements. During the fieldwork, many respondents commented that advertisement 1 made use of more attractive models, nicer clothing and jewellery, and looked more professional. The respondents commented that advertisement 2 did not appear as professionally designed and that the clothing was not appealing. This advertisement also contained a mixed-race couple, which could have influenced the respondents negatively. In addition, advertisement 3 contained a close-up picture of two women kissing, and did not show the clothing being advertised. It was thus difficult for the respondents to judge whether they would buy the brand based on advertisement 3, since the fashion product was not shown. The degree of homoerotic tension was thus not the only factor upon which the respondents judged the advertisements.

The sample size was relatively small, especially considering that when divided into four groups (heterosexual males, heterosexual females, homosexual males and homosexual females), each group became relatively small. It was difficult to expand on this sample size, as the snowball sampling method was not as effective as was hoped for.

The use of closed questions may have biased the respondents' views of the relationship between the women depicted in the advertisements. Furthermore, no open-ended questions were included to ascertain why the respondents did or did not wish to try, purchase or actively search for a brand based on the advertisements.

While conducting the research, the respondents indicated that the advertisements themselves influenced their decision to buy the brand, and male respondents indicated that they would not try the brand as it depicted a women's fashion range. Some homosexual respondents were more inclined to search for the brand, despite appearing to be a women's brand, as they perceived the company and the brand as being "gay-friendly".

The scale used to gauge people's tolerance of homosexuality had six negatively worded questions regarding homosexuality and only two positively worded questions. This could have led to inaccuracies due to people glossing over the positively worded statement among the negative statements and thus marking the incorrect side of the scale. The negative statements about homosexuality also tended to offend homosexual respondents. A scale containing a better balance between positive and negative statements should be designed.

People were asked to classify themselves as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. This could have led to response bias because of the sensitive nature of the topic.

12. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It appears that heterosexual and homosexual consumers have similar feelings towards the advertisements. Homosexual consumers are not significantly more open to this type of advertising and the degree of lesbian homoerotic tension in an advertisement does not seem to increase consumers' brand interest significantly. Yet, it is interesting to note that there is a reasonable correlation between consumers' tolerance of homosexuality and their acceptance of the lesbian content in the advertisements.

In terms of attracting attention and interest, and being memorable to consumers, advertisements containing clear lesbian interaction are more effective than those with lower levels of homoerotic tension. Companies should, however, have established a good reputation prior to using these types of advertisements, as consumers are more likely to perceive the advertisements as being offensive, exploitive and unethical. A small percentage of consumers may develop negative attitudes towards the brand and the company, if lesbian appeals are used.

In terms of portraying a high quality brand, advertisers should rather utilise an advertisement with a low degree of homoerotic tension. This type of advertising was also seen as fairly interesting, appealing and memorable, and may actually be more effective in selling the product. The company should, however, be well established as selling both male and female clothing, to avoid excluding male buyers. It may also help if the company has a well-known brand name prior to using lesbian chic appeals.

Recommendations for future research include:

- Testing the difference in people's perceptions and acceptance of advertisements containing homoerotic tension between two women and a similar degree of homoerotic tension between two men
- Investigating possible gender differences in the tolerance of homosexuality and the impact thereof on consumers' reactions towards homoerotic advertisements
- Investigating the perceptions of homosexual consumers, especially males, over the age of 30, since they generally have greater spending power than their younger counterparts
- Determining the influence of other factors, such as race, religion and language group, on consumers' reactions towards advertisements containing homosexual appeals

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