Something Seems Fishy: Mainstream Consumer Response to Drag Queen Imagery

Sarah Frankel and Sejin Ha, University of Tennessee

Keywords: Drag Queen Imagery, Tolerance, Advertising, Attitudes, Beauty Brand

Introduction: In an era of multicultural diversity, marketers are witnessing widespread presence of cultural and sexual minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+) in mainstream media. This lucrative market is growing that the ratio of American adults identifying as LGBTQ+ increased to 4.5% in 2017 from 4.1% in 2016 (Newport, 2018), while the purchasing power of this group reached $917 billion in 2015, up from 3.7 percent in 2014 (Green, 2016). Accordingly, fashion retail marketers are finding the LGBTQ+ culture to be an opportunity for expanding and sustaining their business (Hester & Gibson, 2007). These changes, however, can be viewed as exciting to some but may still meet with resistance within the mainstream media and broader consumers. Understanding the ways that marketers may be able to target their fashion branding to include the LGTBQ+ community and its supporters by using the mainstream media will be vital to acquiring additional market shares. There is, however, a perceived paradigm that is now being approached: *how to attract the target segment without simultaneously alienating the members of society with a lower tolerance towards homosexuality (e.g., individuals who oppose LGTBQ+ rights)*? Despite increasing popular culture interest, little research has investigated this phenomenon within the fashion marketing campaigns/advertising context. The purpose of this study is to fill a void by examining how mainstream consumers receive drag queen–themed imagery in beauty product advertising. Specifically, this study explores the effects of two different portrayals of ad (implicit vs. explicit drag-themed ad) and consumers' tolerance of drag queen on their attitudes toward the ad and brand.

Literature Review and Hypotheses: Previous research in advertising and marketing literatures has well documented distinctions between implicit and explicit imagery in ad (e.g., Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). Implicit adverting relies on a subtle means to deliver a message, allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions. Conversely, explicit advertising makes a direct statement and thus viewers do not need to interpret the message (Andrews & Shrimp, 2018). A consumer's tolerance as a personality variable, is defined as the degree to which an individual "permits as something not wholly approved of" (Black, 1979 as cited in Stevenson, 1988). As an antecedent to acceptance, enhancing tolerance yields positive changes (Stevenson, 1988) that high tolerance is associated with being 'open', 'other-focused', and 'universalistic', while low tolerance relates to be 'self- focused', 'controlled', and 'intolerant to ambiguity' (Um, 2014).

According to social identity theory (SIT) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), individuals define themselves partly in terms of a relevant membership in a social group. In this sense, individuals position themselves within various social groups that reflect their personal idiosyncratic characteristics and further define in-group characteristics (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Once formed, a social identity, referring to being an in-group member as opposed to an out-group,

promotes positive self-relevant (self-esteem, self-enhancement) as well as group-relevant (commitment, loyalty) outcomes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1978).

When exposed to a drag queen-themed advertisement, consumers with high tolerance of LGBTQ+ would perceive the ad as being in line with basic human values of importance and thus exhibit more favorable in-group comparisons. Those with low tolerance, contrarily, perceive a drag queen depicted in an ad as an out-group member, hindering them from formulating favorable responses to the ad and the brand. Thus, the higher consumers' tolerance of drag queens, the more positive attitudes toward ad (H1a) and brand (H1b). A direct and strong claim of drag in an ad (i.e., explicit drag-themed ad) in comparison to a roundabout depiction of drag (i.e., implicit ad) is likely to provoke consumers' perception that the ad portrays out-group values, leading to less favorable responses. Thus, implicit drag-themed ad will have a greater impact on positive attitudes toward ad (H2a) and brand (H2b) than explicit ad. Furthermore, consumer tolerance of drag queens may interact with a way that an ad renders a drag queen that high tolerance can magnify the positive effect of implicit imagery on attitude while low tolerance may lessen such effect. There will be an interaction effect between consumer tolerance of drag queens and type of drag-themed ad such that the impact of tolerance on positive attitude toward ad (H3a) and brand (H3b) will become stronger for implicit-themed ad than explicit ad. Lastly, ad attitude will mediate the interactive effects of ad type and tolerance on brand attitude (H4).

Methods: A web-based experiment was conducted with a single-factor between-respondent design in which three levels of explicitness of drag imagery were portrayed in an ad for a beauty brand's Instagram feed. A total of 199 US consumers (M_{age} = 35, 53.8% male) were recruited via Amazon MTurk. Each participant was allocated randomly to one of three ad conditions (control with no image and text referring to drag vs. implicit with only image vs. explicit with both image and text directing drag on the ad). After reviewing the ad, participants answered a questionnaire regarding attitude towards the advertisement and brand (Hester & Gibson, 2005) and individual tolerance toward drag queens adapted from the tolerance toward homosexuality scale (Kite & Deaux, 1986) on a 5-point scale. Manipulation of ad type and reliabilities of measures were confirmed.

Results: PROCESS procedure (Model 8 with 5000 bootstrap samples) was used (Hayes 2013; Hayes & Rockwood, 2017). Ad type with three conditions was treated as a multicategorical variable. First, ad attitude is significantly associated with tolerance supporting H1a but not with ad type and the interaction between tolerance and ad type, rejecting H2a and H3a. Second, brand attitude is significantly predicted by tolerance and the tolerance-ad type interaction, supporting H2b and H2c. As for the effect of ad type, both implicit (β = 1.21, p < 0.01) and explicit (β = 1.34, p < 0.01) ads in reference to the control ad are shown to enhance brand attitude but the difference between the effects was insignificant, rejecting H2b. Lastly, ad attitude mediates the effect of tolerance on brand attitude for explicit ad (LLCI = .148, ULCI = .439, B = .269, SE = .074), but not for implicit ad (LLCI = -.058, ULCI = .286, B = .135, SE = .086), partially supporting H4.

Discussion: Given the overall perception of increased tolerance levels towards homosexuality by American consumers, fashion and beauty advertisers may still be reluctant to embrace drag queen and LGBTQ+ inclusive imagery in advertisements outside of LGBTQ+ targeted outlets (e.g. OUT magazine). The results of this study demonstrate that the type of image does not negatively affect the attitude towards the brand; in fact, there is evidence that consumers positively respond to a brand regardless of the degree of LGBTQ + explicitness in an image. Moreover, only in the explicit image condition, attitude towards the brand mediates the relationship between tolerance and brand attitude. Therefore, fashion and beauty marketing teams should consider LGBTQ+ inclusive imagery in advertisements without risk of tarnish the overall brand image to consumers, even the ones who might feel uncomfortable with the content of the advertisement. This study provides new insight to fashion advertising literature that has argued implicit homosexual imagery is the best tactic to target the LGBTQ+ community. Our findings are in line with previous SIT research but are brought into an exciting new context of drag queens; specifically, this is arguably the first study to examine the effects of drag queen imagery in fashion brands' advertisements.

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