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EXPLORING HETEROSEXUAL RESPONSES TO LESBIAN AND GAY-THEMED ADVERTISEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

There has been an increase in lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in mainstream media in South Africa. This suggests that brands are starting to acknowledge LGBTQ consumers as an important consumer market needing representation in advertisements. However, to date little empirical research has examined the response of heterosexual consumers to lesbian and gay-themed advertisements. Therefore, this study examined the impact of tolerance of homosexuality on attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and brands. The findings revealed that participants with a high tolerance towards homosexuality have more positive attitudes towards advertisements and brands. The attitudes towards the advertisements have a significant positive influence on the attitude towards the brand. In addition, the study revealed that heterosexual men exposed to lesbian and gay-themed advertisements tend to have negative attitudes towards advertisements compared to heterosexual women. Managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: lesbian and gay-themed adverts; LGBTQ; heterosexual consumers; brand attitudes; marketing communication; advertising

INTRODUCTION

With approximately five million members (LBM Gay Consumer Profile 2012), or approximately 10% of the population – and an estimated buying power of R152 billion in 2017 – the South African lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) market has been coined the “dream market” (Bagnall 2011). According to Um (2014), same-sex households’ income is substantially higher than their heterosexual counterparts. As such, 79% of lesbian and gay individuals in South Africa earn R10 000 per month and above, with 85% holding a tertiary qualification (LBM Gay Consumer Profile 2012). South Africa has one of the most

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liberal constitutions in the world and was the first country in Africa to integrate sexual orientation in its Bill of Rights in 1996 (Francis & Msibi 2011; Traeen *et al.* 2009). As a result, homosexuality in South Africa has become more acceptable (Aung & Sha 2016; Munyuki & Vincent 2017; Ncanana & Ige 2014) and LGBTQ consumers are considered an attractive market (Dixon 2015; Livermon 2014; Rogerson & Visser 2011).

LGBTQ consumers have been acknowledged as a key consumer segment due to their substantial spending power (Angelini & Bradley 2010; Um 2016), and they have been identified as a sector where brands can grow their revenue and market share (Um 2014). However, this segment is still an “untapped” market in developing economies such as South Africa. As a result, brands are now targeting this consumer base. Furthermore, several scholars state that LGBTQ consumers tend to purchase products advertised directly for them. Therefore, brands are now utilising lesbian and gay-themed advertisements to reach the LGBTQ market. Akestam *et al.* (2017) define lesbian and gay-themed advertisements as those featuring homosexual portrayals. Initially, brands placed lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in so-called gay media (Greenlee 2004). However, a growing number of brands have now started to place lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in mainstream media (Akestam *et al.* 2017), thereby reaching both heterosexual and homosexual consumers (Puntoni *et al.* 2011). Numerous studies indicate that lesbian and gay-themed advertisements might alienate heterosexual consumers (Akestam *et al.* 2017; Greenlee 2004; Um 2014). Likewise, lesbian and gay-themed advertisements are not always received positively by heterosexual consumers (Braun *et al.* 2015), particularly those with a lower tolerance towards homosexuality. Thus, research confirms that some heterosexual consumers tend to have a negative attitude towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in mainstream media (Wan-Hsiu 2011).

Marketing scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about the impact of lesbian and gay-themed advertisements on consumers, particularly heterosexual consumers (Um 2016). Notwithstanding the increase in lesbian and gay-themed advertising, much is still unknown about the attitudes of heterosexual consumers towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements. The present study explores the response

of heterosexual consumers to lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and brands. Accordingly, this study revisits marketing practitioners' anxieties over marketing their products to LGBTQ consumers, and examines whether advertising to lesbian and gay consumers results in an undesirable effect on heterosexuals' attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand. The findings ought to provide practical implications for brands and marketers who are considering targeting LGBTQ consumers to grow their brand and increase their sales and market share.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tolerance towards homosexuality in South Africa

Some of the most influential forces in the community that react to sexuality and perpetuate discrimination are homophobia and heterosexism (Um 2014). According to Bernat *et al.* (2001), the most common definition of homophobia is an attitude of hostility towards people with a homosexual orientation. This definition tends to individualise the process of discrimination and rejection of homosexual individuals (Fraisie & Barrientos 2016). Heterosexism is described as a belief that every person in the society is (or should be) heterosexual (Chamberland & Lebreton 2012). Deliberately (and not deliberately), society tends to privilege heterosexuality, erasing, undervaluing, oppressing or discriminating against the LGBTQ community in the process (Francis & Msibi 2011). Research among different cultural demographics across the globe has revealed a high correlation between the relationship of a country's gay rights laws and the attitudes and perceptions of the people within the country (Levy & Levy 2017).

When apartheid ended more than two decades ago, the new government in South Africa quickly adopted progressive legislation, passing laws that enshrine gender equality and freedom of expression (De Greef 2019). Despite the fact that South Africa passed a Bill of Rights in 1996 that forbids discrimination against individuals on the grounds of sexual orientation, the LGBTQ community still suffers homophobia, particularly in townships and rural areas (Nduna *et al.* 2017). A study conducted by Hosken (2017) found that approximately 50% of the respondents knew and/or had heard of a gay individual who has been assaulted, raped or murdered for being gay.

In South Africa, there has been a significant change in how homosexual individuals are perceived and treated. According to Akermanidis and Ventor (2014), there are two theories explaining the shift in changes of attitudes towards homosexuality:

- ◆ the generational-replacement theory explanation, which states that the older, more conservative generation is being replaced with a younger generation with a higher tolerance towards homosexuality; and
- ◆ changes in politics, social norms and religious affairs have accelerated the acceptance of homosexuals (Vivien 2002).

Society's general attitude towards homosexuality, while not entirely accepted, has become more positive with the growing acceptance of different sexual orientations (Mathenge & Owusu 2017). The social identity theory of in-group favouritism and out-

group discrimination is a way in which some heterosexual people attribute negative characteristics to homosexuals as a way of maintaining a positive in-group social identity. As a result, some heterosexuals consciously or unconsciously perceive homosexual-themed advertisements as a threat to their in-group superiority (Gong 2019).

Lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in mainstream media

Gay advertisements have been defined as “ads targeting gay consumers by carrying implicit or explicit gay references – from vaguely implying same-sex bonding, to explicitly showing self-identified gay characters – and by depicting erotic desire and affection for/between members of the same sex” (Tsai 2004). Thus, there are two types of advertisements in terms of how homosexuality is represented and how the LGBTQ community is targeted (Oakenfull *et al.* 2008), namely explicit and implicit lesbian and gay-themed advertisements (Berisha & Sjogreen 2016).

Implicit lesbian and gay-themed advertisements can be crafted with models or symbols of cultural significance. Therefore, this approach reduces the backlash from heterosexual consumers (Oakenfull & Greenlee 2005). Both implicit and explicit lesbian and gay-themed advertisements are aimed at engaging homosexuals in mainstream media without alienating heterosexual consumers.

As previously discussed, more companies have begun to target the LGBTQ community through mainstream media as it is becoming profitable for advertisers (Ivory 2019). According to Read *et al.* (2018), advertisements that feature the LGBTQ community were traditionally only found in niche markets. However, according to research, “Marketers [recognised] that gay and lesbian consumers consume mainstream media vehicles as much or more than targeted vehicles” (Hester & Gibson 2007). Ivory (2019) found that marketers face difficulties targeting the LGBTQ community through mainstream media, as the advertisements will also be viewed by heterosexuals who might respond negatively. Through his investigation of gay-themed advertisements in gay magazines, Kimb *et al.* (2015) concluded that directly advertising to gay consumers through gay media has the potential of alienating the heterosexual market entirely. But it also meant that it eliminated the small yet growing market of gay consumers who consume traditional media.

Tolerance towards homosexuality and attitudes towards the advertisement and brand

Um (2014) found that people with a high tolerance toward homosexuality have a more positive attitude towards gay-themed advertising compared to those who have a low tolerance. Hester and Gibson (2007) also found that heterosexual respondents who had a low tolerance for homosexuality were more repelled and troubled by gay-themed advertisements compared to those with a high tolerance, who were more accepting. This is confirmed in the study by Bhat *et al.* (1998) who found that “ads with gay imagery produced strong negative emotional responses in those with negative attitudes toward homosexuality, but not in those without such attitudes”. Based on the foregoing discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Tolerance towards homosexuality has a significant positive effect on heterosexual attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements.

H2: Tolerance towards homosexuality has a significant positive effect on heterosexual attitudes towards the brand.

Attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and attitudes towards the brand

Lesbian and gay-themed advertising has attracted more attention with the increase in revenue generated from consumers in the LGBTQ community. According to Kimb *et al.* (2015) gay-themed advertisements usually show two men and/or two women's feet touching under a table, rainbow flags, pink triangles, equal rights, or gay couples showing affection. There has also been a growing interest in understanding consumer attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements (Berisha & Sjogren 2016), and their impact on the advertised brand. According to Shimp (1981: 15) "the attitude toward the advert is defined as the predisposition to respond (react) in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular advert, and has two different components: an affective component reflecting the emotions evoked by the advert and a cognitive component reflecting how well-made and useful the message and the information in it is considered to be". The attitude towards the advertisement and the attitude towards the brand have been extensively explored in consumer research (Cuomo *et al.* 2019; Handriana & Wisandiko 2017; Royo-Vela & Black 2020). The relationship between these variables has been explored in previous studies. Mitchell and Olson (1982) were among the scholars who examined the impact of attitudes towards the advertisement on the advertised brand. Their findings revealed that the attitude towards the advertisement significantly influences the attitude towards the brand. Similarly, Marchegiani and Phau (2010) found a positive relationship between the attitude towards the advertisement and the attitude towards the brand. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements influence attitudes towards the brand.

Gender differences in attitudes towards homosexuality and lesbian and gay-themed advertisements

The attitude of heterosexual men towards homosexual men is that a principle of masculinity is domination, which can only be achieved through the marginalisation of other forms of masculinity – such as gay men (Van der Walt 2007). The period from 1970 to 1990 showed trends that indicated males, in comparison to females, were experiencing an increase in negativity towards homosexuality, specifically towards gay men (Holland-Muter 2018). On the other hand, in a study of 345 participants, females were significantly more tolerant towards homosexuality and homosexual-related issues. This could suggest that females have more personal relationships with homosexual individuals, compared to men, and these relationships were more likely to decrease their negative perceptions of the LGBTQ community (Vivien 2002). An

investigation was conducted on how gay male imagery for jeans and shampoo in magazine advertisements affects consumers' attitude towards the brand. The study indicated that heterosexual males responded negatively and that advertisers should be cautious when developing gay-themed advertisements as it might alienate their primary heterosexual customer base (Thatcher *et al.* 2013). This was also concluded by Um (2014), who found that heterosexual males are less tolerant of homosexuality than heterosexual females are. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H4a: The impact of tolerance of homosexuality on the attitude towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements is higher for female consumers than male consumers.

H4b: The impact of tolerance of homosexuality on the attitude towards brands that use lesbian and gay-themed advertisements is higher for female customers than male customers.

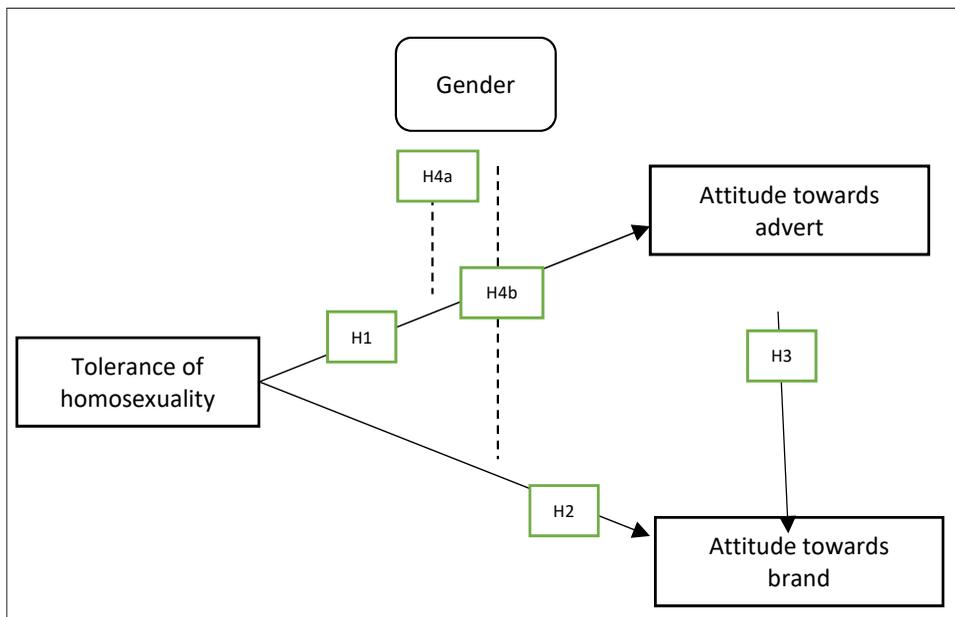


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Homosexuality remains a sensitive issue in many African countries. Due to the sensitivity of the current study, the researchers designed a web-based self-completion questionnaire using Survey Monkey and posted the questionnaire link on several social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp). The assumption was that the respondents were more likely to “open up” to a computer-based survey, than they would in a face-to-face environment. The researchers made use of filter questions to ensure that the respondents were appropriately categorised. Responses from

262 survey participants were collected. Incomplete surveys, as well as responses from participants who stated they were homosexual or preferred not to state their sexual orientation, were removed (82 in total). After deleting these questionnaires, 180 responses were used for the data analysis.

Table 1 describes the demographics of the study's sample. The demographic information pertains to the participants' age, gender, and education level. The sample comprises 52.8% women and 47.2% men. The majority of the participants had a high school certificate (43.3%), while 40.6% had a degree or diploma, and 16.1% possessed a postgraduate qualification. Just over 64% (64.4%) of the respondents were age between 18 and 22, while 24.4% were between the ages of 23 and 26, and 8.9% between the ages of 27 and 31. Only 2.2% participants were aged 38 and above.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Items	Types	Full sample (N= 180)	
		No.	%
Age	18-22	116	64.4
	23-26	44	24.4
	27-31	16	8.9
	32-37	0	0
	38+	4	2.2
Gender	Female	95	52.8
	Male	85	47.2
Education level	Primary school	0	0
	High school	78	43.3
	Degree/Diploma	73	40.6
	Postgraduate degree	29	16.1

Measures

This study examined three constructs:

- ◆ tolerance of homosexuality
- ◆ attitude towards the advertisement
- ◆ attitude towards the brand

The measurement scales utilised in this study were validated and considered reliable in previous studies. The measurements for tolerance of homosexuality were adopted from

Herek (1988). An eight-item scale was used to measure tolerance of homosexuality. The scale, developed by Sengupta and Johar (2002), was used to measure the attitude towards the brand. This scale is a three-item scale that determines the consumer's attitude to a product or a specific brand. The attitude towards an advertisement was determined by using the three-item scale developed by Homer (1995). A six-item scaled adopted from Homer (1995) was used to measure the attitude towards the advertisement, while a five-item scaled adopted from Sengupta and Johar (2002) was used to measure the attitude towards the brand. A seven-point Likert scale was used in this study for all the items.

RESULTS

The structural equation modelling (SEM) approach was used for data analysis in this study. SEM is also known as a second-generation technique that offers simultaneous modelling of relationships among multiple independent and dependent constructs (Lim *et al.* 2017). Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was deemed appropriate to comply with the predictive oriented objective of this study (Hair *et al.* 2017). The PLS-SEM method, using Smart PLS 3.0, was applied for analysis purposes, and a two-step approach was followed. First, the measurement model was estimated based on confirmatory factor analysis. Second, the structural model was analysed, the path coefficients estimated, and the hypotheses tested.

The aim of this study was to identify the relationships among tolerance of homosexuality, attitude towards an advertisement, and attitude towards the brand.

Measurement model

The reliabilities of the measurement instrument utilised in this study were computed by performing PLS-SEM. A two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing 1988) for separate estimation and re-specification of the measurement model with confirmatory factor analyses was applied before the simultaneous estimation of the measurement and structural model. In the first step, the researchers checked for measurement items with loadings of less than 0.5. The intention was to delete items with less than 0.5 loadings. The loadings for the study were between 0.720 and 0.960, as shown in Table 2. Consequently, all the item loadings were retained. The loadings were statistically significant; therefore, indicating that the findings demonstrated high convergent validity. The measurement instrument comprised of three research constructs, namely tolerance of homosexuality (8 items), attitude towards the advertisement (6 items), and attitude towards the brand (5 items). In total, the measurement instrument had 19 items. Table 2 indicates the measurement items, their means, standard deviations, outer loadings, and average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent variable. All the items were administered using a seven-point Likert scale format, from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree).

The Cronbach's alpha (α), and AVE for each latent construct were calculated and are also displayed as measurement properties in Table 2. The Cronbach's alphas of the three variables in the study were satisfactory, as they were above the threshold of 0.7, indicating internal consistency reliability. For discriminant validity, AVE was calculated

for each latent construct. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), a set threshold level of 0.5 for AVE is recommended, which was attained in this study as the AVE values were between 0.721 and 0.855. The validity was tested using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. The results presented in Table 3 indicate satisfactory coefficients; therefore, meeting the required standards.

TABLE 2: MEASUREMENT PROPERTIES OF DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT CONSTRUCTS

Research construct	Mean	SD	Outer loading	Cronbach's alpha value α	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Tolerance towards homosexuality (TTH)						
TTH1	2.228	1.693	.781			
TTH2	1.644	1.268	.905			
TTH3	1.628	1.247	.878			
TTH4	1.917	1.556	.925	.952	.960	.750
TTH5	1.800	1.485	.900			
TTH6	2.006	1.526	.898			
TTH7	1.383	0.871	.785			
TTH8	1.428	1.033	.843			
Attitude towards advertisement (ATA)						
ATA1	3.333	1.378	.745			
ATA2	3.756	1.555	.720			
ATA3	3.517	1.611	.887	.922	.939	.721
ATA4	3.161	1.502	.918			
ATA5	3.017	1.420	.902			
ATA6	2.878	1.448	.899			
Attitude towards brand (ATB)						
ATB1	2.883	1.568	.920			
ATB2	2.728	1.475	.960			
ATB3	2.689	1.499	.954	.957	.967	.855
ATB4	2.817	1.565	.941			
ATB5	3.283	1.600	.844			

Note: Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR)

All scale endings were administered using a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree.

TABLE 3: DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY ACCORDING TO FORNELL AND LARCKER (1981) CRITERION

	1	2	3
Attitude towards advertisement	.849		
Attitude towards brand	.597	.925	
Tolerance of homosexuality	.240	.530	.866

Prior to estimating the structural model, collinearity statistics was performed. The VIF values were between 1.902 and 4.813. The VIF values were below the threshold value of 5 (Hair & Lukas 2014). Therefore, no lateral collinearity issues were detected.

Results of model estimation

To evaluate model suitability, the researchers used two approaches, namely the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) and global goodness of fit (GoF). The SRMR measures the variance between the observed correlation matrix and the correlation matrix involved in the model. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), SRMR less than 0.8 shows good model adaptation. The model of the current study has a SRMR value of 0.060. Therefore, the model is suitable. GoF presents the overall measure of adjustment, and which is the average of the mean extracted variance (AVE) and the mean of R^2 of the endogenous variables (Tenenhaus *et al.* 2005). The formula, suggested by Tenenhaus *et al.* (2005), was used to calculate the goodness of fit (GoF). The formula is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Goodness of Fit} &= 2\sqrt{(\text{average of all AVEs values} * \text{average of all } R^2)} \\ &= 2\sqrt{0.775 * 0.543} \\ &= 0.42 \end{aligned}$$

AVE represents the average of all AVE values for the research variables, while R^2 represents the average of all R^2 values in the full path model. The calculated global GoF is 0.42, which exceeds the threshold of $\text{GoF} > 0.36$ suggested by Wetzels *et al.* (2009).

Assessment of structural model

The measurement model was tested for this study. The predictive accuracy of the model was evaluated in terms of the portion of the variance explained. The results suggest that the model is capable of explaining only 5.7% of the variance in the attitude towards an advertisement, and 51% in the attitude towards the advertisement (see Figure 1). Nonparametric bootstrapping was performed with 5 000 duplications to assess the structural model.

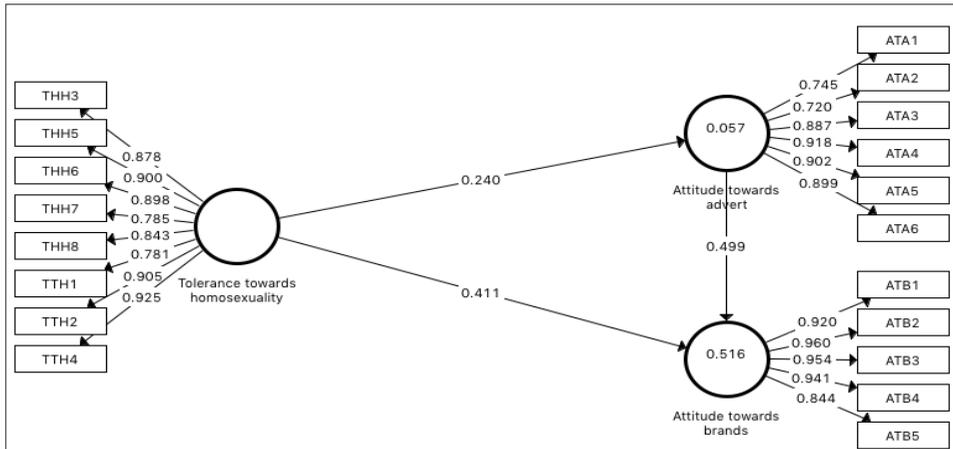


FIGURE 2: RESULTS OF STRUCTURAL MODELLING ANALYSIS

Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses testing: Direct effects (H1 To H3)

In Table 4, PLS-bootstrapping (Preacher & Hayes 2004) results (with 95% bias corrected confidence interval) reveal that tolerance of homosexuality is a significant determinant of the attitude towards an advertisement ($\beta = 0.240$, t -value = 2.422, p -value = 0.016), therefore, supporting H1.

A study conducted by Bhat *et al.* (1998) on how heterosexual consumers respond to gay imagery advertisements found that the level of tolerance towards homosexuality strongly influences heterosexual consumers' emotional response to gay-themed advertisements and brands. Tolerance of homosexuality has an influence on attitude towards brands ($\beta = 0.411$, t -value = 5.889, p -value = 0.000); therefore, supporting H2. Berisha and Sjogren (2016) conducted a qualitative study on heterosexual consumers' attitudes toward homosexual-themed advertisements. After the analysis of the participants' responses, Berisha and Sjogren (2016) established that heterosexual consumers have a positive attitude towards brands that feature a lesbian or gay individual in their advertisements. Most respondents indicated that brands that feature homosexuals in their advertisements appear to be thoughtful. One of the respondents indicated that he has a desire to associate himself with brands that are not racist or homophobic. This study's finding is supported by Hester and Gibson (2007), who found that individuals who are more tolerant of homosexuality showed a positive attitude towards brands that do not exclude homosexual individuals in their advertisements. Lastly, attitudes towards gay-themed advertisements significantly influence the attitudes towards the brand ($\beta = 0.499$, $t = 7.374$, $p = 0.000$); thus, H3 is also supported. This finding is in line with a study conducted by Handriana and Wisandiko (2017), which found a positive relationship between attitudes towards an advertisement and attitudes towards a brand. According to Christian *et al.* (2014), attitudes towards the

brand depends on attitude towards the advertisement. Therefore, consumer attitudes towards the advertisement are strongly linked with attitudes towards the brand.

TABLE 4: OVERALL RESULTS OF HYPOTHESES TESTING

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	P-value	Result
H1	Tolerance of homosexuality = attitude towards advert	.240	2.422	0.016	Supported
H2	Tolerance of homosexuality = attitude towards brand	.411	5.889	0.000	Supported
H3	Attitude towards advert – attitude towards brand	.499	7.374	0.000	Supported

Hypotheses testing: Moderating effect (H4a and H4b)

The sample was divided into two sub-groups, namely, females and males. Multi-group analysis (MGA) PLS analysis was performed to compare the differences between the male and female participants. MGA analysis was performed to examine the moderating effect (Henseler *et al.* 2016) of gender on the effect of tolerance of homosexuality on lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and brands. The MGA results revealed that the path coefficient between tolerance of homosexuality and attitude towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements is significantly larger in female participants than male participants ($\beta_{\text{female}} = 0.363$, $\beta_{\text{males}} = 0.160$); thus, supporting H4a (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). This finding has ample support from previous empirical research studies. LaTour and Henthorne (1994) established that men and women react differently to advertisements.

Previous studies have revealed that heterosexual men's attitudes towards homosexuality is relatively negative, while heterosexual women's attitudes towards homosexuality is positive (Eagly *et al.* 2004; Herek 1988; Klug & Vigar-Ellis 2012). A study by Iacoviello *et al.* (2019) on the attitudes of heterosexual men towards homosexuality confirmed that heterosexual men tend to have less tolerance towards homosexuality. On the other hand, a study conducted by Lim (2002) examining gender differences and tolerance of homosexuality found that women are more comfortable with homosexuality compared to men.

Dotson *et al.* (2009) investigated gender impact on gay and lesbian-themed fashion advertisements. The authors exposed the participants to different fashion brand advertisements, namely an overtly gay men-themed advertisement; an overtly lesbian-themed advertisement; a heterosexual-themed advertisement; an ambiguously lesbian-themed advertisement; and an ambiguously gay-themed advertisement. Their

findings revealed that heterosexual men tend to have a negative attitude towards advertisements with overtly gay men and ambiguously gay men than heterosexual females. Furthermore, the path coefficient between the tolerance of homosexuality and attitude towards the brand was larger in male respondents than female respondents ($\beta_{\text{male}} = 0.462$, $\beta_{\text{females}} = 0.201$); therefore H4b is not supported. This is in line with the findings of Dotson *et al.* (2009) who established that heterosexual women have a decrease in their attitude towards a brand after being exposed to lesbian and gay-themed advertisements.

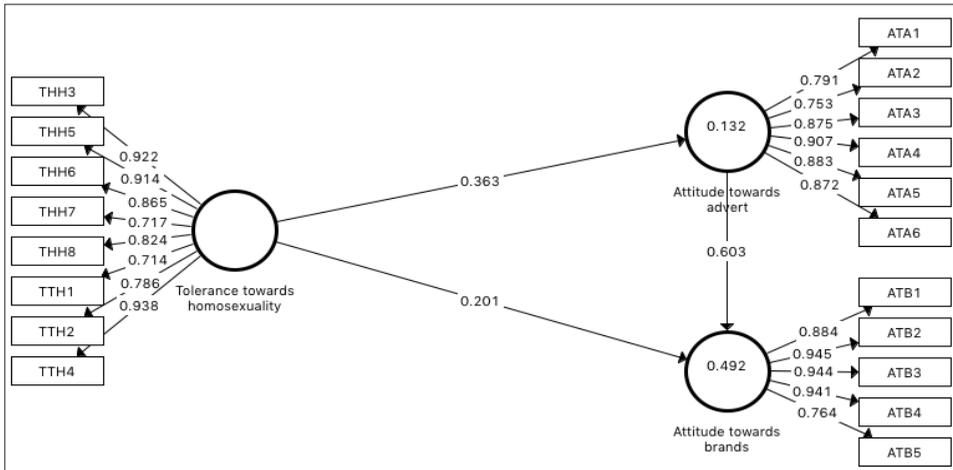


FIGURE 3: FEMALE SAMPLES (N=95)

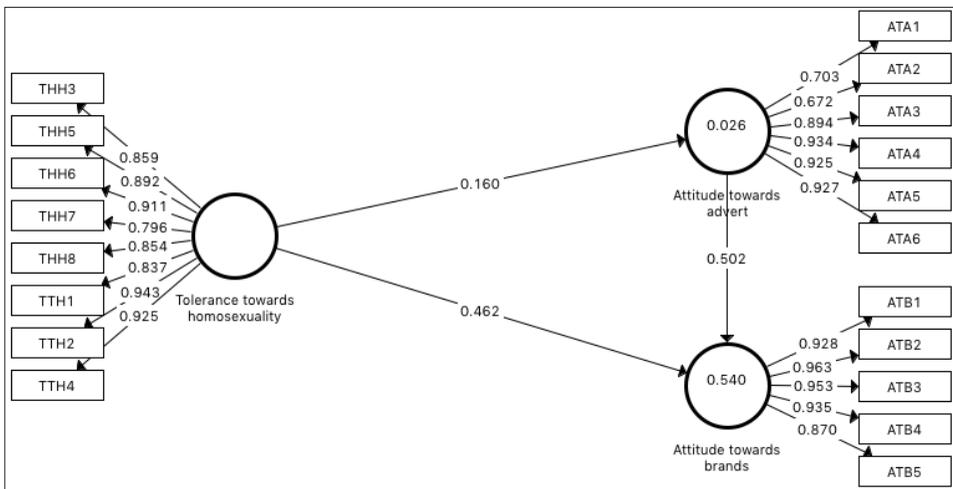


FIGURE 4: MALE SAMPLES (N=85)

Importance-performance matrix analysis

To analyse the relative importance and performance of each construct for “attitude towards brand”, an additional analysis was conducted using the importance-performance matrix analysis (IPMA) (Ringle & Sarstedt 2016). The results (Table 5) showed that the attitude towards the advertisement was the most important construct for influencing the attitude towards the brand (0.558), while tolerance was the least important construct in influencing the attitude towards the brand (0.525). In terms of performance criteria, the attitude towards the advertisement was well performing (around 31%), while tolerance towards homosexuality had minimum value (around 12%).

TABLE 5: ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS: IPMA RESULTS (TARGET CONSTRUCT- ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE ADVERT)

Constructs	Importance	Performance
Attitude towards advertisement	0.558	31.065
Tolerance towards homosexuality	0.525	11.650

Managerial implications

The findings revealed that South African heterosexual consumers generally had a tolerance towards homosexuality. Thus, brands should take account of the magnified prominence of homosexual individuals in the community, media and consumer markets, and specifically identify and view them as an important consumer group by integrating corresponding advertising profiles beyond heteronormative images targeting heterosexual mainstream consumers.

It is clear that brands can make use of lesbian and gay-themed advertisements without endangering the advertised brand. It can be argued that, when lesbian and gay-themed advertisements become popular in the mainstream media, homosexual individuals would feel a greater sense of belonging in society. Brands that feature homosexual individuals in their advertisements can help change society’s attitudes towards homosexuals, which might reduce homophobia in society. The need not to offend sensitive consumers is one of several problems that advertisers face. For several other purposes, advertisers can utilise inclusive strategies. For example, brands that incorporate lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in their communication strategies are considered to be on the “cutting edge” of social issues. Among heterosexual consumers, the negative effect originating from lesbian and gay-themed advertising is expected to decline as society’s perception of homosexuality shows a trend towards increased acceptance. In fact, they can be seen as being morally or socially responsible enough to advance the concept of inclusiveness. Furthermore, heterosexual allies tend to have a negative attitude towards brands that do not show their support for minority groups, such as the LGBTQ community.

Before using lesbian and gay-themed advertisements, marketers need to understand the social and demographic factors of their market. Kotler and Keller (2012) indicated that marketers who want to “think outside the box” and produce advertisements that consumers are not used to seeing, must be careful not to overstep social norms. For instance, brands can use explicit homosexual advertisements to target homosexual consumers in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique, as these countries have a high tolerance of homosexuals (O’Donnell 2016). This tactic can be risky in masculine and low tolerance towards homosexuality African countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Uganda and Burkina Faso (O’Donnell 2016). Regional advertising is recommended in South Africa, as the country has LGBTQ-friendly cities and anti-LGBTQ friendly cities. According to Gallagher (2018), Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and Knysna are the most gay-friendly cities in South Africa. Placing lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in anti-LGBTQ cities might generate a backlash from heterosexual individuals. Although using gay media to reach the LGBTQ community is advisable, it is recommended that advertisers should also use mainstream media. According to Um (2014), less than 50% of the LGBTQ community read magazines or other publications aimed specifically at gay people.

CONCLUSION

There has been an increase in lesbian and gay-themed advertisements in mainstream media. This suggests that brands are starting to acknowledge LGBTQ consumers as an important consumer market that needs representation in advertisements. However, to date little empirical research has been carried out on the impact of lesbian and gay-themed advertisements on the attitudes of heterosexual consumers, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. This study attempted to fill the void by exploring how the tolerance of homosexuality by heterosexual consumers influences their attitudes towards lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and brands. The study revealed that tolerance of homosexuality has an impact on consumer attitudes towards the lesbian and gay-themed advertisements and brands advertised. Furthermore, heterosexual men were found to be less tolerant of homosexuality compared to heterosexual women. Brands that make use of lesbian and gay-themed advertising are seen to be socially responsible by advancing the idea of inclusivity. It is important to note that such brands run the risk of offending some customers. However, in LGBTQ-friendly countries such as South Africa, the benefits obtained from being LGBTQ-friendly outweighs the backlash from consumers with a low tolerance towards homosexuality.

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