

Tracy L. Tuten¹ **The Effect of Gay-Friendly and Non-Gay-Friendly Cues on Brand Attitudes: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Gay/Lesbian Reactions**

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This study sought to evaluate responses of gay and heterosexual consumers to gay-friendly and non-friendly cues and the resultant effects on the variables of brand satisfaction, brand commitment, and attitude toward the brand. Variables for predicting brand commitment based on Rusbult's Investment Model are explored. Results suggest that heterosexual consumers, while noticing gay-friendly cues in brand communications, do not develop negative attitudes as a result of exposure to those cues. Further, as gay and lesbian consumers react positively and strongly and heterosexual consumers react neutrally, it is a reasonable strategy for brands to pursue gay-friendly marketing.

Keywords:

Introduction

The concept of gay-targeted marketing has incited great interest as companies recognize the lucrative potential associated with achieving brand commitment from the highly coveted gay and lesbian consumer market. Early work emphasized the "gold mine" associated with the gay and lesbian market, but further analysis of the gay and lesbian market gave much needed perspective on the "myth of affluence" (Badgett 2001). Still, gay and lesbian consumers have been shown as younger, more fashion conscious, and more brand loyal than heterosexuals (Miller 1990) and Penaloza (1996) established the value of the gay and lesbian market as its own market segment. Consequently, companies have sought to establish recognition with the gay and lesbian market by advertising in gay media, using gay themes in mainstream media, making financial donations to gay causes and developing

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corporate policies that will be perceived as gay-friendly.² While gay-friendly marketing continues to grow, other firms forego targeting this market segment. Those abstaining from corporate choices promoting diversity and gay-targeted communications may base the decision on a desire to maintain the commitment of core target markets, a political or religious statement regarding the gay and lesbian market, and/or a simple lack of participation in targeting based on sexual orientation.

Consequently, this study investigates the effectiveness of gay-friendly positioning strategies and non-gay-friendly positioning and compares the attitudes of heterosexual consumers to those of gay and lesbian consumers. Using Rusbult's Investment Model as a theoretical base, this study also evaluates the determinants of brand commitment for heterosexual and gay/lesbian consumers. The research questions addressed can be thought of as comprising three categories: 1) recognition of gay-friendly and non-gay-friendly cues, 2) response to gay-friendly and non-gay-friendly cues, and 3) determinants of brand commitment based on sexual orientation. The paper begins by describing the literature and background framing the research questions.

Gay-Friendly Positioning

The term, *gay-friendly*, is widely used in discussions of marketing brands to gay and lesbian consumers. Generally, it can be thought of much like other "friendly" terms such as environmentally-friendly, family-friendly, and pet-friendly. Taken in that context, to suggest that a brand and/or company is *gay-friendly* would imply that the brand/company is proactive in respecting and addressing the needs of gays; just as suggesting that a brand is environmentally-friendly implies that the brand is proactive in taking steps to protect the environment.

Ricker and Witeck (2003) approach the concept in a similar manner by describing how forward-thinking corporations expressed respect for gays and lesbians by implementing fair workplace employment practices. They view the trend toward gay-targeted marketing as a "translation of corporate citizenship into marketing strategies" (Ricker and Witeck 2003). The concept that *gay-friendliness* embodies both workplace practices and marketing strategies meshes with the findings of Tuten and Neidermeyer (2003). In a content analysis of message board discussion on www.gay.com, they found that gay and lesbian consumers consider corporate policies such as offering domestic partner benefits, supporting an anti-discrimination policy, and encouraging acceptance of diversity in the workplace, as well as advertising in both gay and mainstream media, providing financial support to gay

² Readers interested in learning more about the history of the gay market are encouraged to see Branchik (2002) for a thorough review.

causes, and including gay themes in advertising. A survey by Witeck-Combs Communications and Harris Interactive found that the attitudes of gays and lesbians toward companies are influenced by corporate policies (Gay and lesbian consumers trust brands most from companies with progressive policies 2001).

There appears to be no question that a brand seeking to develop commitment from the gay and lesbian market must be perceived as gay-friendly. A survey by the GL Census Partners (*2001 gay/lesbian consumer online census: A glimpse inside the 2001 gay/lesbian consumer online census* 2001) showed that nearly half of its respondents agreed that when deciding whether or not to buy a product or service, they try to find out whether or not the company is gay-friendly. More than 8 out of 10 respondents to the GL Census 2001 Survey agreed that they were more likely to buy products from companies they knew were gay-friendly. Similar conclusions were reported in the book, *Twenty Million New Consumers* (Kates 1998), which presented the results of interviews with gay men living in Toronto.

Rankings of gay-friendly companies now appear on websites for gay consumers such as the 'gfn.com 50.' The website, www.gfn.com, describes the gfn.com 50 as a comprehensive list of the most powerful and gay-friendly public companies in corporate America. Another website, the Human Rights Campaign at www.hrc.org, provides an index of corporate equality for consumers seeking information about gay-friendly brands.

Response to Gay-Friendly and Non-Gay-Friendly Positioning

While existing research supports the importance of gay-friendly positioning to gay consumers, little is known about the remaining three quadrants: gay and lesbian consumer attitudes toward non-gay-friendly brands, heterosexual attitudes toward gay-friendly brands, and heterosexual attitudes toward non-gay-friendly brands. Grier and Brumbaugh (1999:80) note that meanings constructed by target and non-target consumers may be different, and marketers do care about negative responses from non-target consumers. Consequently, marketers should recognize the possible effects of positioning relative to the targets segmented by sexual orientation. In this study, attitudes investigated include brand commitment, brand satisfaction, and attitude toward the brand.

Attitudinal Differences to Gay-Friendly Positioning by Sexual Orientation

Despite research supporting the value of gay-friendly positioning for targeting gay and lesbian consumers, some marketers remain concerned that appeals targeting gays and lesbians may alienate the heterosexual market (Miller 1995; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). Harris (1989), for instance, recognized that advertising executives were concerned that using ethnic

minority actors could act to weaken a brand's bond to its majority market. Literature on consumer perceptions of marketing that targets ethnic minority groups is useful in guiding research on consumer perceptions of marketing to other minority groups such as those based on sexual orientation. A study of gay-targeted advertising reported in Ricker and Witeck (2003) found that heterosexual consumers reported negative attitudes when presented with examples of gay-targeted advertising. They warn against the potential of alienating heterosexual groups when using gay-targeted marketing communications.

In fact, to achieve a balance between the desire to target members of both sexual orientations, some brands utilize "gay vague" appeals in advertising. Use of gay vague appeals allows a brand to simultaneously target the gay and lesbian market and the heterosexual market. Gay vague advertising, a term coined by Michael Wilke, is advertising that speaks to gay and lesbian culture without garnering recognition of gay positioning from heterosexuals (see www.commercialcloset.org for a discussion of gay vague advertising and several examples).

Regardless of techniques like gay vague advertising, just as gay and lesbian consumers respond more positively toward gay-friendly positioning, heterosexual consumers may respond more negatively. Such a response, if found, could be simply a result of marketing that clearly targets another audience, the result of negative attitudes toward homosexuality, or lack of acceptance of a changing market landscape.

Hypothesis 1: Differences will exist between heterosexual consumers and gay/lesbian consumers on attitudes toward gay-friendly brands. Attitudes will be more positive for gay/lesbian consumers.

Attitudinal Differences to Non-Gay-Friendly Positioning by Sexual Orientation

While no known research has studied the specific effects of non-gay-friendly positioning on heterosexual consumers, some evidence suggests that gay and lesbian consumers will respond negatively to such positioning. For instance, Tuten and Neidermeyer (2003) concluded that gay and lesbian consumers have strong avoidance motivation toward anti-gay-friendly brands. It is important to note that a clear distinction has not been made between anti-gay brands and non-gay-friendly brands. Anti-gay brands are brands that are perceived by the gay and lesbian market as actively working against the acceptance and equality of gay and lesbian consumers. Non-gay-friendly brands, at least in this study, refer to brands that have not taken steps to be recognized as gay-friendly. This may be perceived as anti-gay to some, but as simply a non-participant in the gay/lesbian marketplace by

others. In either case, one can expect that attitudes toward non-gay-friendly brands will be more negative than those toward gay-friendly brands among gay and lesbian consumers.

Hypothesis 2: Differences will exist between heterosexual and gay/lesbian consumers on attitudes toward non-gay-friendly brands. Attitudes will be more positive for heterosexual consumers.

Involvement in sexual orientation (identity) may moderate the relationship between sexual orientation and response to gay-friendly positioning. Do gay and lesbian consumers who strongly identify with their sexual orientation respond more positively to gay-friendly positioning? However, heterosexuals who identify strongly with their sexual orientation may tend to identify negatively with gay-friendly positioning.

Hypothesis 3: Involvement in sexual orientation moderates the relationship between sexual orientation and response to gay-friendly positioning.

We also expect that heterosexuals with negative attitudes toward homosexuality will respond negatively to gay-friendly positioning. This is expected based on past research, which showed that heterosexuals' responses to ads with gay imagery depended on their attitude toward homosexuality (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow 1998). However, in that study, the effect on attitude toward the brand was more subtle than on attitude toward the ad. As attitudes toward homosexuality become more positive, attitudes toward gay-friendly brands are expected to become more positive. This line of reasoning is important for branding as gay and lesbian issues are increasingly integrated into mainstream consciousness.

Hypothesis 4: Attitude toward homosexuality will have a direct relationship with attitudes toward gay-friendly brands.

Determinants of Brand Commitment and Satisfaction

In addition to understanding differences in the resultant attitudes to sexually-oriented positioning strategies by sexual orientation, this study also sought to determine the antecedent variables relevant in explaining these attitudes. Rusbult's Investment Model (Rusbult 1979a, 1979b) was identified as a theoretical base.

Recognized as a generic theory of relationship management (Bui, Peplau, and Hill 1996; Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia 1999; Ping 1993; Farrell and Rusbult 1992; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous 1988; Rusbult, Johnson,

and Morrow 1986; Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986; Tuten 1996; Tuten and Sleeth 2002), Rusbult's Investment Model explains satisfaction with and commitment to a wide variety of relationships. It has been used to explain commitment and problem-solving behaviors in several relationship types including romantic relationships between both heterosexual (Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia 1999; Rusbult 1979a, b; Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow 1986; Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn 1982; Sprecher 1998), and homosexual couples (Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek 1986), friendships (Rusbult 1979b), distribution channel relationships (Ping 1993), consumer to brand-name product relationships (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1991), employee to employee relationships (Tuten, Gray, and Glascoff 2000); employee to management relationships (Farrell and Rusbult 1981; Farrell and Rusbult 1992; Rusbult and Lowery 1985; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous 1988; Tuten 1996).

Based somewhat on Interdependence Theory (Thibaut and Kelley 1959), the Investment Model expands and formalizes Interdependence Theory by identifying three basic variables that determine commitment: satisfaction, alternative value, and investment size (Farrell and Rusbult 1981). Brand commitment (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1989) is defined as the tendency to continue using a brand and to feel psychologically attached to it. An individual's *satisfaction* reflects a comparison rewards and costs. An individual's *alternative quality* represents a perception of the quantity and quality of other options (availability of other equal or better brand choices). An individual's *investment* represents psychological or material resources applied to brand associations. These might include time spent comparing brands, money spent on brand research, length of brand patronage, and status associated with brand usage (Geyer, Dotson, and King 1989). Investment of intrinsic and extrinsic resources serves to increase *commitment* by increasing the costs associated with switching.

In this study, brand commitment is examined as a function of the rewards and costs associated with using the brand, investments in the relationship with the brand, and alternatives to using that brand. Rewards and costs associated with the relationship result in brand satisfaction. It is anticipated that the model will serve as a strong base for both heterosexual and gay/lesbian consumers. However, gays and lesbians might associate greater rewards with gay-friendly brands while heterosexuals might associate more costs with those same brands.

Hypothesis 5a: The variance associated with brand satisfaction will be explained by the rewards and costs associated with the brand regardless of sexual orientation but sexual orientation will mediate the relative perceptions of rewards and costs.

Hypothesis 5b: Commitment to a brand is a function of brand satisfaction, investment in the brand relationship, and alternatives to using the brand regardless of sexual orientation.

Methods

Procedures and Measures

The hypotheses described were investigated using an online questionnaire to collect data from a sample of consumers including both heterosexual and gay and lesbian consumers. Respondents were part of the E-poll web access panel (see www.epoll.com for recruitment and panel management information). The E-poll panel is comprised of individuals who agree to participate periodically in online surveys. As such, they are self-selected to membership in the panel and self-identified according to sexual orientation. E-poll maintains a record of demographic responses to past surveys and can match on variables to determine whether answers to potentially sensitive questions, such as sexual orientation, are inconsistent. In this case, inconsistent responders were eliminated from the sample prior to analysis. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: control, gay-friendly condition, non-gay-friendly condition. The control condition asked respondents to indicate which discount mass merchandiser they most often shopped with and contained no references to gay-friendliness. The gay-friendly condition used Target as the brand of interest while the non-gay-friendly brand was based on Wal-Mart. Level of gay-friendliness (gay-friendly or non-gay-friendly) was manipulated by providing the reader with each brand's Corporate Equality Score (published by the Human Rights Campaign; see www.hrc.org). Target's corporate equality score is an 86 (out of a possible 100) and Wal-Mart's score is a 14. All other references to the two brands were identical across the two conditions.

The questions were the same in each condition and included measures of the perception of gay-friendliness for the brand, attitude toward the brand, and the Investment Model variables of brand satisfaction, brand commitment, rewards associated with the brand, costs (financial and psychological), investment in the brand, and alternatives to the brand. The Investment Model variables were modified slightly to accommodate the use of the measures in a consumer-brand relationship. Involvement in one's sexual identity and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were also assessed (Herek 1994; Herek 2002). Finally, demographic questions including sexual orientation were asked. The measures and Cronbach's alpha for each measure are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Measures and Cronbach's alphas

Attitude toward the brand, 5-point semantic differential scale, (e.g., Dotson and Hyatt, 2000), Cronbach's Alpha = .88

Biased -Unbiased
 Convincing - Unconvincing
 Believable - Unbelievable
 Unfavorable - Favorable
 Bad - Good
 Unpleasant - Pleasant
 Low quality - High quality

Brand commitment, 5-point, Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .89

I am committed to buying from ____.
 I always shop at ____.
 It is important to me to shop with ____.

Brand satisfaction, 5-point Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .96

In general, I really like the ____ brand.
 I am very satisfied with ____.
 All things considered, there are many good things I associate with shopping at ____.

Rewards, 5-point Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .87

It is rewarding to shop at ____.
 When I shop at ____, I get a good value for my money.
 It is financially beneficial for me to shop at ____.
 ____ provides great prices.
 I am pleased to support this brand's social causes by shopping there.

Costs, 5-point Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .83

I experience negative feelings when I shop at ____ because of its corporate policies.
 It is expensive to shop at ____.

Alternative quality, 5-point Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986), Cronbach's Alpha = .83

If I did not want to shop at ____ any longer, I have many other stores to choose from.
 I consider other store brands equally acceptable to ____.
 It would be easy for me to find an acceptable alternative to shopping at ____.

**Investment size, 5-point Likert Scale, adapted from Rusbult et al (1986),
Cronbach's Alpha = .85**

If I shopped at a different store, I would lose many benefits I receive by shopping at ____.
I have shopped at ____ for a long time.

Involvement in Sexual Orientation, 5-point Likert Scale, Cronbach's Alpha = .75

I identify with the sexual orientation group I identified above.
I think about my sexual orientation a lot.
My sexual orientation is an important part of who I am.
My sexual orientation is relevant to the life I lead.

Attitude toward Gay Men/ Attitude toward Lesbians (short form), 5-point Likert Scale, Herek, 1994, Cronbach's Alpha = .88 for ATG; .77 for ATL

Sex between two men is perfectly acceptable.
I think male homosexuals are disgusting. (r)
Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality between two men.
Sex between two women is perfectly acceptable.
I think lesbians are disgusting. (r)
Female homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality between two women.

For the scale variables (attitude toward the brand, brand satisfaction, brand commitment, rewards, costs, alternatives, investments, involvement, and attitude toward homosexuality), the scale values were obtained by averaging responses for the respective item sets (mean score). Higher scores indicate more positive responses. For instance higher scores on the attitude toward the brand scale indicate positive attitudes toward the brand.

Participants

Of the 774 respondents to the Web-based survey, 67.2% self-identified as heterosexual, 22.2% as gay or lesbian, 4.1% as bisexual, and 6.5% refused to answer. The remaining analyses will focus on the heterosexual and gay/lesbian respondents and exclude bisexual answers and refusals. 42.5% were female and 57.5% were male. Age distributions indicate that 15.6 % were 18-24, 25.3% were 25-34, 23.5% were 35-44, 17.3% were 45-54, and 16.5% were 55 and older. Income appears to be well-distributed among the sample with 37.9% in the \$25,000-49,999 range and all categories represented. Most respondents had completed some college (28.6%) and an additional 20% had completed a four-year college degree.

Results

Manipulation Check

The first analysis sought to establish recognition between the groups with regard to the presence of a gay-friendly cue. Gay-friendliness or non-gay

friendliness was established by including the HRC's Corporate Equality Index score for the two brands.

In comparing mean scores across experimental conditions to the statement, "(brand name) is a gay-friendly brand", significant differences do appear suggesting that the respondents recognized the gay-friendly positioning in the brand description. The success of this manipulation is further supported by viewing the mean score in the control group for this statement.

Table 2. Mean Scores by Sexual Orientation and Experimental Group on Assessment of Brand Gay-Friendliness

Experimental Condition	Control	Gay-Friendly (Target)	Non-Gay-Friendly (Wal-Mart)
Heterosexual	3.06	3.24	2.86
Gay/ Lesbian	3.03	3.69	2.36
Total	3.04	3.30	2.72

Table reports mean scores based on a scale of 1 to 5. Scores closer to 5 indicate higher perceptions of gay-friendliness. Differences are significant at the .05 level.

It is also apparent, that while groups in both sexual orientations identified the gay-friendly positioning in the brand descriptions, the identification is stronger for gay and lesbian consumers than for heterosexuals.

Response to Gay-Friendly and Non-Gay-Friendly Positioning

This section reports the investigation of the question, 'how do consumers respond to gay-friendly or non-gay positioning cues and how does response differ by sexual orientation?' Specifically, the study investigates the relationships between gay-friendly brand positioning and attitude toward the brand, brand commitment, and brand satisfaction and how these relationships might differ for heterosexual and gay/ lesbian consumers. The role involvement in sexual identity may play in understanding these relationships and the role attitude toward homosexuality plays in understanding heterosexual reactions to gay-friendly positioning.

Gay-Friendly Positioning and Attitude toward the Brand

Hypothesis 1 suggested that differences will exist between heterosexual consumers and gay/lesbian consumers on attitudes toward gay-friendly brands and those attitudes will be more positive for gay/lesbian consumers. To examine this hypothesis, the mean scores (MANOVA) are presented for each cell to illustrate the differences between groups (see Table 3). A

correlation analysis is also used to understand the relationship between gay-friendly positioning and attitude toward the brand.

Table 3. Mean Scores for Attitude toward the Brand by Experimental Condition and Sexual Orientation

Experimental Condition	Control	Gay-Friendly (Target)	Non-Gay-Friendly (Wal-Mart)
Heterosexual	3.36	3.62	3.44
Gay/ Lesbian	3.35	3.74	3.18
Total	3.35	3.65	3.35

Differences significant at the .05 level.

From Table 3, one can see that among gay and lesbian consumers, Target scored significantly higher than Wal-Mart on attitude toward the brand. This is true too for the heterosexual consumers; though, the difference is not as great. Overall, it appears that the Target brand scores more positively than Wal-Mart.

While Table 3 is encouraging, it is possible that Target is simply a better liked brand so next the relationships between gay-friendly positioning and attitude toward the brand scores were studied. For efficiency in presentation, Tables 4 and 5 also contain the descriptive measures for other variables which will be discussed shortly.

Table 4. Inter-correlations controlling for Experimental Condition, Heterosexual Orientation (N= 481)

Items in Scale	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceptions of gay-friendliness					
2. Attitude toward the brand	.26*				
3. Brand satisfaction	.27*	.57*			
4. Brand commitment	.22*	.42*	.67*		
5. Sexual Identity	.06	.17	.12	.14	
6. Attitude toward Homosexuality	.13	.03	-.02	.04	-.16

* indicates significance at p<.01.

From Table 4, one can see a significant and positive relationship between the variable of gay-friendliness and attitude toward the brand. This suggests that even among heterosexuals, gay-friendly positioning is positively perceived; although, this is a relatively weak effect size.

Table 5 examines the same variables for gay and lesbian consumers. Again, in this case, gay-friendliness is positively and significantly related to attitude toward the brand. For gay and lesbian consumers, though, the effect size is stronger than in the heterosexual group.

Table 5. Inter-correlations controlling for Experimental Condition, GL Consumers (N = 155)

Items in Scale	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceptions of gay-friendliness					
2. Attitude toward the brand	.51*				
3. Brand satisfaction	.29*	.60*			
4. Brand commitment	.26*	.47*	.65*		
5. Sexual Identity	.02	.06	-.06	-.13	
6. Attitude toward Homosexuality	.11	-.01	.11	-.04	.05

* indicates significance at $p < .01$.

Gay-Friendly Positioning and Brand Satisfaction

In this analysis, the relationship between gay-friendly positioning and brand satisfaction is assessed for both sexual orientations. Table 6 provides the mean scores while Tables 4 and 5 contain the relevant inter-correlations.

Table 6. Mean Scores for Brand Satisfaction by Experimental Condition and Sexual Orientation

Experimental Condition	Control	Gay-Friendly (Target)	Non-Gay-Friendly (Wal-Mart)
Heterosexual	3.51	3.45	3.50
Gay/ Lesbian	3.69	3.57	2.98
Total	3.54	3.47	3.32

The effect of gay-friendly (or non-gay-friendly positioning) is illustrated in Table 6. Among heterosexuals, there is no significant difference in brand satisfaction, suggesting that the gay-friendly positioning is irrelevant for this group in determining satisfaction with a retail brand. However, among the gay and lesbian group, significant differences occurred with the control group (absence of gay-friendly positioning) and Target scoring significantly

higher than Wal-Mart. While one might expect for the gay-friendly Target condition to score the highest on brand satisfaction, the control group in the study was asked to respond with regard to the store where they shop the most. In that case, it is reasonable to assume they would only choose a store with positive brand satisfaction.

The correlations presented in Tables 4 and 5 show a positive, significant relationship between gay-friendly positioning and brand satisfaction in both sexual orientations. The implication is that there is the potential to increase brand satisfaction among a brand's gay customers while not harming, and possibly increasing, the satisfaction of heterosexuals.

Gay-Friendly Positioning and Brand Commitment

Table 7 presents mean scores by experimental condition and sexual orientation for the scale brand commitment. Brand commitment is thought to be a function of satisfaction but it is also described in the literature as a function of the costs associated with maintaining use of the brand, investments in one's relationship with the brand, and the availability of reasonable alternatives. This helps to explain the mean scores shown in Table 7, which illustrate low levels of brand commitment in all cases (recall that the control group responded with regard to the store where they shop most often). Heterosexuals are more committed to Wal-Mart, while gays and lesbians are more loyal to Target. Still, all scores suggest that these brands have not developed strong brand commitment.

Overall, the results provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 using several attitudinal measures.

Table 7. Mean Scores for Brand Commitment by Experimental Condition and Sexual Orientation

Experimental Condition	Control	Gay-Friendly (Target)	Non-Gay-Friendly (Wal-Mart)
Heterosexual	3.07	2.55	2.84
Gay/ Lesbian	3.00	2.86	2.43
Total	3.02	2.61	2.73

All difference significant at the .05 level.

Involvement in Sexual Orientation and Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men

Involvement in sexual orientation (identity) was thought to moderate the relationship between sexual orientation classification and response to gay-friendly positioning. In that case, gay and lesbian consumers who strongly

identify with their sexual orientation would respond more positively to gay-friendly positioning. However, heterosexuals who identify strongly with their sexual orientation would tend to identify negatively with gay-friendly positioning (Hypothesis 3). In addition, heterosexuals with negative attitudes toward homosexuality would be more negative with regard to gay-friendly positioning (Hypothesis 4). The correlation analysis presented in Tables 4 and 5 do not support these hypotheses. No significant relationships exist for either group. In a regression analysis, involvement in sexual orientation was a significant variable in explaining brand commitment for gay and lesbian consumers but was not significant for heterosexual consumers.

Application of Rusbult's Investment Model: Brand Commitment and Satisfaction based on Sexual Orientation

What variables act as determinants of the dependent variables of brand commitment and brand satisfaction? Are these variables different based on sexual orientation? To address these questions, a hierarchical regression analysis with stepwise analysis was conducted using brand commitment and brand satisfaction as dependent variables, respectively. Analyses were run separately for heterosexuals and gay consumers in order to separate the effects of sexual orientation in understanding brand commitment and satisfaction.

The Investment Model (e.g., Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow 1986) suggests that brand commitment is a function of the rewards and costs associated with using the brand, investments in the relationship with the brand, and alternatives to using that brand. Brand satisfaction is a function of rewards and costs. Consequently, either satisfaction or rewards and costs should be used in regressions involving brand commitment. We first assess the variables which explain the variance associated with brand satisfaction for heterosexuals and gay consumers and then conduct a similar analysis for brand commitment.

Table 8. Hierarchical regression analysis to explain brand satisfaction, GL consumers (N=155)

Variable	β	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}
Group	-.11			
Rewards	.63	.80	.65	.64
Attitude toward the brand	.19			

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .05$.

Table 9. Hierarchical regression analysis to explain brand satisfaction, Heterosexual consumers (N=481)

Variable	β	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}
Group	.02	.77	.60	.60
Rewards	.71			

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .05$.

While Hypothesis 5a postulated that rewards and costs would explain the variance associated with brand satisfaction, this was only partially supported in the results. Rewards were an important explanatory variable in regressions for both sexual orientation groups, and, in fact, the only explanatory variable for heterosexuals with an R² of 60%. In the analysis of brand satisfaction among gay and lesbian consumers, attitude toward the brand was also a significant explanatory variable, resulting in an R² of 64%. Costs did not appear as a significant variable for either group.

Hypothesis 5b suggested that brand commitment would be associated with satisfaction, investment, and alternative quality as described in the Investment Model. For the gay and lesbian consumers, a hierarchical regression analysis indicated that satisfaction and investment predict as expected. In addition, although weak in its effect size, involvement in sexual identity appears in the model with a significant, negative influence on brand commitment. The negative coefficient for involvement might suggest that the more strongly a gay identifies with his or her sexual identity the less brand commitment he or she will tend to feel to brands. The Investment Model postulates that the variable of alternative quality should appear with a negative Beta coefficient. In other words, generally, we would expect that the fewer alternatives available, the stronger a person's brand commitment. Its absence as a significant variable in this analysis might suggest that alternatives are not a salient concept for the gay and lesbian market at this point in time. This model explains 49% of the variance associated with brand commitment among gays and lesbians.

Table 10. Hierarchical regression analysis to explain brand commitment, GL consumers (N=155)

Variable	β	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}
Group	-.04			
Satisfaction	.52	.71	.50	.49
Investments	.29			
Involvement in Sexual Identity	-.12			

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .05$.

In the heterosexual analysis of brand commitment, the Investment Model predictions were just as expected. Satisfaction, investments, and alternatives explain 58% of the variance associated with brand commitment for heterosexuals. All coefficients are in the expected direction.

Table 11. Hierarchical regression analysis to explain brand commitment, Heterosexual consumers (N=481)

Variable	β	R	R ²	R ² _{adj}
Satisfaction	.49			
Investments	.32	.76	.58	.58
Alternatives	-.18			

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .05$.

Thus, it appears that the Rusbult's Investment Model is a useful theoretical base for viewing brand commitment by sexual orientation. However, Hypothesis 5 receives only partial support given the differences found in the relevant variables by sexual orientation.

Discussion

The results of the study suggest several implications for marketers targeting based on sexual orientation. First, consumers, both gays and heterosexuals, recognize the use of gay-friendly and non-gay-friendly positioning in brand communications. It would be unwise to assume that heterosexual consumers will not be aware or might fail to recognize any cues related to a brand's level of gay-friendliness. Second, while some have suggested that pursuing the gay market will come at the expense of a firm's heterosexual market (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999), evidence of that view point was not found here. Rather, heterosexual attitudes did not decline when faced with gay brand positioning. The gay and lesbian group responded positively to this positioning and heterosexuals responded at worst neutrally and even somewhat positively to the communications. Firms can relax knowing that they can safely promote a position of gay-friendliness without alienating their heterosexual constituency. Perhaps as gays and lesbians acquire more prevalent roles in the media, achieve equitable workplace benefits, and become increasingly "mainstream", heterosexual consumers will view gay-friendly marketing as no more or less than any other targeted marketing approach.

Despite this finding, it remains important to use caution when applying gay-friendly positioning. Ricker and Witeck (2003) found a mix of reactions

from heterosexuals in their study of gay-targeted advertising across five products. While all the advertisements used in their study included some form of gay imagery, ads which were gay-vague were the most successful in appealing to gay and heterosexual consumers. It is possible that advertising may cause more intense reactions from the heterosexual market than a more general acknowledgement of gay-friendliness on the part of a brand (such as providing financial support for gay-friendly causes and offering domestic partner benefits in the workplace). The relative influence of different forms of marketing communications on attitudes toward gay-friendly positioning among both gays and heterosexuals will be a ripe area for future research.

When viewing customer satisfaction with a brand, no differences were found for the gay and non-gay-friendly brands for heterosexuals, but, as expected, gay/lesbian consumers responded positively and strongly. Satisfaction with a brand among the gay and lesbian market is based on attitude toward the brand, and rewards for using that brand (both financial and social). Cost was not a factor. In fact, it appears based on variables related to attitude toward the brand that the gay/lesbian consumers will suffer costs (financial and/or social) without lowering their satisfaction with the brand when that brand is perceived well in terms of gay-friendliness.

Satisfaction with a brand among the heterosexual market is based on the rewards of using that brand. In other words, for heterosexual customers, tangible benefits appear to be the most important factors affecting satisfaction.

Using Rusbult's Investment Model, brand commitment could be explained for gay and lesbian consumers with the variables of satisfaction, investments, and involvement in sexual identity. It is also important to note that while the gay-friendly brand scored high levels of satisfaction with gay and lesbian consumers, it did not result in strong perceptions of brand commitment. Rather, those perceptions were neutral. Thus, it will become important to understand how investments can be increased in brand-consumer relationships.

Brand commitment for heterosexual consumers can be explained by using the variables of satisfaction, investment, and alternatives. Alternatives act to lower commitment to a brand as individuals perceive the presence of acceptable choices available in the marketplace. It is interesting to note that the gay and lesbian group did not perceive these same choices.

In this study, involvement in sexual identity and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians did not provide explanatory value in understanding the attitudes toward gay-friendly and non-gay-friendly positioning strategies. This is surprising based on past literature (Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow 1998; Herek 2002) and may be a result of measurement issues. Future research should further investigate the possible influence of sexual identity and

attitudes toward gays and lesbians on brand attitudes.

While this study represents one of few with reasonably large sample sizes, there are limitations. One such limitation is the use of a non-probability sample in an online survey. Respondents were members of the online E-poll panel. As such, they were self-selected to membership and self-identified according to sexual orientation. There are safeguards in place, though. E-poll utilizes rotations in its requests for survey participation in order to prevent respondent fatigue. Among those chosen for participation in this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three groups. Further, respondent indications of sexual orientation were checked against E-poll's database to determine whether answers to potentially sensitive questions, such as sexual orientation, are inconsistent. In this case, inconsistent responders were eliminated from the sample prior to analysis.

The use of brands with pre-existing attitudes is both a limitation and an advantage. While it may be difficult to truly separate the effects of gay-related cues from previous experience, it does represent a changing market-place situation with which consumers are commonly confronted.

The differences in the antecedents to brand commitment and brand satisfaction for gay and lesbian consumers versus heterosexual consumers represent a ripe area of research. Why might gays and lesbians view costs differently than heterosexuals? Will the view of alternatives (or lack there of) change for gay and lesbian consumers as more and more companies begin to target them?

In conclusion, this paper presents the insight that heterosexual consumers, while noticing gay-friendly cues in brand communications, may not develop negative attitudes as a result of exposure to those cues. Thus, while gay and lesbian consumers react positively and strongly and heterosexual consumers do not react at all, it is a reasonable strategy to pursue gay-friendly marketing. In addition, while Rusbult's Investment Model served as a valuable framework for understanding how consumers develop brand commitment, gays and lesbians appear to perceive fewer available alternatives than do heterosexual consumers. Further, gay and lesbian consumers did not appear to consider costs in assessments of brand satisfaction.

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