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The Relative Importance of Appearance and Language in Consumers' Evaluations of Multicultural Models in Television Commercials

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The growing multicultural population in the United States has resulted in more and more individuals negotiating multiple ethnic identities in their daily lives. According to Pew Research, the number of Americans who identified as more than one race nearly doubled 2010 and 2020. In fact, the number of persons identifying as biracial more than doubled in 34 states between 2010 and 2020 (Henderson, 2022). Despite the increasingly multicultural nature of the U.S. population, the advertising industry has lagged in fully reflecting the multicultural nature of the American consumer.

As the face of the American mainstream evolves, so do consumer expectations of the brands they consume. It has become more difficult for marketers to understand and reach these consumers with culturally relevant messaging. While industry has recognized the shift in the cultural makeup of the population and often attempt to account for multiple ethnicities in commercials, the portrayals are still limited to multiple individuals each from a single, identifiable ethnic group, despite the growing numbers of individuals who are from multiple ethnic groups. Advertising targeted to multicultural target groups still, by and large feature models who reinforce stereotypes related to what members of different ethnic groups look like.

This study aims to expand the literature on source effects by examining the relative importance of appearance and language in consumers' evaluations of multicultural models in television commercials. Specifically, using accommodation theory as a framework, the study explores how multicultural models affect customers' perceptions of the source's credibility, attractiveness as well as overall attitudes toward the commercial, the brand and intent to purchase.

Previous work on source effects has focused on credibility and attractiveness, both of which have been argued to affect the persuasiveness of a message source, especially in cases where viewers process these messages peripherally (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Kang & Herr, 2006; McCracken, 1989; McGuire, 1989; Cacioppo & Petty, 1983). While there is no shortage of literature on source credibility and attractiveness (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Kang & Herr, 2006; McCracken, 1989; McGuire, 1989; Cacioppo & Petty, 1983), there is a definite gap. Research on attractiveness of the message source has focused largely on the physical appearance of the individual but has failed to take into account the simultaneous effect of verbal elements, such as language, that also affects perceptions of credibility, likeability and similarity.

A posttest only experiment was conducted. A total of six simulated television advertisements were produced. Stratified random allocation to treatment was used to assign models to one of the

six treatment conditions. The results of this study found that incongruence between source appearance and language does not produce significantly different perceptions of source trustworthiness, similarity, or significantly different ad message involvement, attitude towards the brand or ad for any ethnic group.

Keywords: *Multicultural marketing, Multicultural advertising, Multicultural models, Hispanic marketing*

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Neleen Leslie-Piper is an Assistant Professor of Strategic Communications and Public Relations at Notre Dame College in South Euclid, Ohio. She is a graduate of Florida State University, where she earned her PhD in Communication as well as master's degrees in Integrated Marketing & Management Communication and Measurement & Statistics.