Long-Term Effects of Exposure to Advertisements in Early Childhood

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This research explains long-term effects of advertising prior to development of persuasion knowledge on consumer judgment that persist into adulthood. Results from two experiments demonstrate that: (1) positive affect felt toward early childhood advertising objects, but not late childhood advertising objects, leads to judgments in favor of attributes of advertised brands; and (2) enhancing accessibility to cognitive corrections can facilitate bias correction, but only when affect felt toward childhood advertising objects is less positive. These results have important implications for long-term consequences of advertising to young children for health-related product categories, such as sugary snacks, fast foods, tobacco, and alcohol.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In this research, we argue that brand relationships that are formed in early childhood have unique properties that make them especially prone to create judgments in favor of brands. This is because they were first experienced when the individual lacked ability to defend against advertisements. That is, children do not consistently recognize an advertiser’s intent to persuade them consistently until age seven or eight (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977).

In their influential persuasion knowledge model, Friestad and Wright (1994) argue that as individuals age and gain persuasive knowledge, they correct for previous bias through a process called change-of-meaning. However, Petty and Briñol (2008) assert that bias correction is best facilitated when motivation and ability to process information are high. Based on this position, we suggest that individuals may not be aware of their previous biases (i.e., favorable attitudes toward a brand that were developed before the development of persuasion knowledge), and subsequently do not correct bias spontaneously.

Because early childhood brand relationships are situated in the past, we argue that they are housed in the autobiographical memory store. Autobiographical memories are those memories that comprise one’s life story, and are believed to be of fundamental significance to the self (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 1999). As a consequence of their importance to the self, autobiographical memories tend to be affect-laden (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 1999). Previous consumer research on autobiographical memory has found that cuesing autobiographical memories can lead to attenuation in information processing, due to their affective nature (Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993).

We test our theoretical model by introducing a variable that could override expected biases in judgment and enhance an individual’s capacity to correct bias toward the brand (Petty and Briñol 2008). While people are able to hold a large number of beliefs toward an object, only a smaller set are accessible at a given time due to constraints in cognitive capacity (Doll and Ajzen 1992). This ability to control attention and engage in effortful, attentive processing is known as working memory capacity (Barrett, Tugade, and Engle 2004).

Because people tend to use the knowledge that is most accessible to them in forming judgments (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Smith 1990), and because positive affect is likely to cause biased evaluations (Batra and Stayman 1990; Ison and Shalker 1982; Mackie and Worth 1989; Schwarz and Clore 1983), we seek to drawn attention away from affective attributes and toward other product attributes that can be evaluated more critically (e.g., nutrition). Thus, we aim to make the utilitarian aspects of the product more accessible than its hedonic aspects. Because high levels of affect are chronically more accessible than less polarized levels of affect (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Tajfel 1969), we expect that highly positive affect will retain its accessibility and interfere with the individual’s capacity to correct bias.

In experiment 1, we test our developmental stage hypothesis by comparing an early childhood advertising icon (Tony the Tiger, continuously and heavily advertised to children since 1951 and presumably would have been experienced at a very early age) with a late childhood (after age eight) advertising icon (M&Ms characters, introduced in 1998, after participants in the study would have developed persuasion knowledge). Eighty-two participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: early (Tony the Tiger) or late (M&Ms) childhood. After being exposed to an image of the childhood advertising spokescharacter and visualizing a memory of it, participants completed a feeling thermometer as an affect measure. Participants then read one of two passages concerning an ostensible seminar topic that their college of business was considering offering. One passage contained information on children’s inability to defend against advertisements due to developmental constraints (heightened accessibility to bias correction) and the control passage contained information on the elderly’s inability to defend against advertisements due to cognitive decline. Participants then rated an associated fictitious food product (Kellogg’s Frosted Puffs for Tony the Tiger or M&Ms) on an inventory of five nutrition-related product attributes (e.g., fiber content) embedded within nine other product attributes (e.g., stays crunchy in milk). Results of experiment 2 support our hypothesized relationship between age, product, and accessibility to bias correction. As expected, there was no significant difference in judgment among participants in the late childhood consumption condition (M&Ms). Participants in the early childhood condition (Tony the Tiger) who felt lower levels of positive emotion toward it evaluated an associated product extension as less nutritious than participants who experienced higher levels of positive affect when bias correction was made accessible.

In experiment 2, we address limitations in experiment 1 by substituting a more subtle bias correction manipulation (priming) and measuring judgment toward an original product (FrostedFlakes) rather than a fictitious product (Frosted Puffs) in the same procedure as experiment 1. Consistent with the previous experiment, we observed a significant 2-way interaction of prime and affect on the judgment dependent variable. When primed for health, participants who were cued for memory of an early childhood spokescharacter (Tony the Tiger) and felt higher levels of positive affect toward it evaluated the associated product (Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes) as more nutritious than participants who experienced lower levels of positive affect.

Results from this research indicate that affect-laden memories of childhood advertisements can result in judgments in favor of a brand. Results also indicate that the stage at which childhood advertisements are encoded into memory matters, as more favorable judgments are observed for participants cued for memory of early childhood advertising, but not for participants cued for memory of late childhood advertising. We attribute these differences to the development of persuasion knowledge in late childhood that facilitates skepticism toward advertisements. However, this skepticism appears to be directed only to advertisements seen after persuasion knowledge is gained. Furthermore, adults sometimes fail to correct bias, as has been previously supposed. Finally, we find that enhancing capacity to correct bias is limited in its effectiveness to consumers who are relatively less vulnerable (i.e., experience lower levels of felt affect toward early childhood advertising objects).