Advertising Beauty Can Influence Children’S Advertising Model Perception, Self-Perception and Advertising Effectiveness

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Two experimental studies with respectively 8-10 year old (N=79) and 11-13 year old (N=61) girls and boys confirm the presence of the physical attractiveness stereotype in children and its negative influence on general self-worth for 8-10 year old boys and positive influence on attitudes and intentions for 8-10 year olds.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research using adult samples has shown that attractive (versus unattractive) models are rated more positive on other unrelated characteristics. This is explained by the physical attractiveness (PA) stereotype, also called the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype or the perception that physically attractive individuals possess more positive qualities and experience more satisfying life outcomes than do unattractive individuals (Dion et al., 1972). This PA stereotype leads people to believe that attractive people are, for example, also happier, more popular etc. People also agree more often with the opinion of attractive (versus less attractive) individuals (Kardes et al., 2011) and attractive sources are more persuasive than less attractive sources (Solomon et al., 1992). Research on adults has also shown that attractive models in advertising can negatively influence self-ratings of attractiveness, self-esteem and mood (e.g. Thornton and Moore, 1993).

In two experimental studies, we determine how the use of attractive (versus less attractive) models influences children’s (study 1: 8-10 years old; study 2: 11-13 years old) state of mind. We investigate (1) whether the physical attractiveness stereotype applies to children, (2) whether children’s self-perception is influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, (3) whether children’s attitudes and buying intentions are influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, and (4) whether age affects (1), (2) and (3).

Our contribution to the literature is threefold: (1) we add to the limited research on the PA stereotype in children by investigating if the PA stereotype differs for children of two different age groups. Research on cognitive development suggests that the effects of the PA stereotype should be larger for younger children compared to older children; (2) To date, only one study exists on the influence of attractive (versus less attractive) models on the self-perception of children (Van de Deen et al., 2011), which concentrates on the influence of idealised attractive models on girls between 10 and 13 years old. We extend this by investigating both boys and girls between 8 and 13 years old and by concentrating on non-idealised attractive models; (3) no research on the effects of using attractive models in advertising on children’s attitudes and behaviour exists - while attractive models are often used in advertising to children.

In both studies, children were randomly confronted with an advertisement using either an attractive or less attractive same-sex model of their own age group. The models (one boy and one girl for each study) used in the studies were the same person in both the attractive and less attractive ad, but were depicted as less attractive by changing some facial characteristics using Photoshop. Pretesting showed that the “attractive” and “less attractive” models were identified as such in both age groups. In study 1, 79 children between 8 and 10 years old participated (47% girls; M = 9, SD = .59); In study 2, 61 children of 11-13 years old participated (49% girls; M = 13, SD = .53). In study 1 children saw an ad for a new pencil case, in study 2 children saw an ad for a new Wii game; a pretest showed that both products are gender-neutral. Before exposure to the ad, children reported their age and gender. Then, they completed all five items from the ‘general self-worth’ and two items of the ‘physical appearance’ subscales of the Dutch version (Treffers et al., 2002) of Harter’s (1988) Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPP-A). The children responded to the questions on a five-point scale, for which each answer possibility had verbal anchors (study 1 and study 2) and/or non-verbal anchor points (emoticons; study 1). Next, children saw the ad and filled in questions about their attitude towards the ad, purchase intention (Derbaix and Pecheux, 2003) and the attractiveness of the model on 5-point scales. To assess the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype, we asked children to rate the sources on individual characteristics, which were adapted from previous studies and adjusted to the age of our sample on a five-point scale. Finally, children completed the SPP-A subscales again. Reliability analysis were performed for all individual scales and indicated coefficient alphas within the acceptable range.

Our results confirm the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype in children; attractiveness predicted evaluations of characteristics related to attractiveness (i.e., “being friendly”, “being kind”) and unrelated to attractiveness (i.e. “being good at sports”). Children of 8-10 years old also related characteristics like “being smart” and “following the rules” to attractiveness while 11-13 year old children did not, showing that the extent to which children attribute positive characteristics to attractive people decreases with age.

We also found that more characteristics were predicted by attractiveness for girls (versus boys) of 8-10 years old while 11-13 years old boys and girls attribute about the same number of positive characteristics to attractive models but some of the specific characteristics that are attributed differ. Future research could additionally investigate these gender differences to identify the origin of these gender differences. Our results also show that only the self-perception of the youngest boys in our studies is negatively affected by exposure to attractiveness in advertising which contradicts previous studies. Most previous studies, however, used idealised or highly attractive models, whereas this study employed moderately attractive models versus unattractive models. Future research should focus on the drivers behind this effect and should examine if lower self-perception is temporarily induced, why exposure to attractive models causes shifts in self-perception, why gender differences exist and if children with high (versus low) self-perceptions are responding differently to advertising stimuli.

An attractive (versus less attractive) model results in higher message effectiveness as measured by attitude towards the ad and purchase intention, but only for 8-10 year old children. These results are consistent with previous studies that indicate that children between 7 and 10 have low ability and motivation to process arguments in advertising, making peripheral information (such as model attractiveness) more important (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

REFERENCES


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