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The Role of Self in Evaluation of Advertisements With Highly Attractive Models

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The Role of Self in Evaluation of Advertisements with Highly Attractive Models Rajani Ganesh Pillai, University of Central Florida Yun-Oh Whang, University of Central Florida Judy Harris, University of Central Florida Past research on the negative effects of using highly attractive sources in advertisements suggests that this could be because of social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, and/or jealousy. The present study extends this research by suggesting that the perceived discrepancy between the consumer and the source has an impact as well. The results of this study indicate that the use of highly attractive sources in advertisements can lead to a gap between perceived image of the self and that of the source, and that greater gaps motivate consumers to scrutinize and process the ad claims more closely. It is also found that the magnitude of the gap inversely influences the attitudes toward the ad and the brand.

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The Role of Self in Evaluation of Advertisements with Highly Attractive Models

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Media, whether it is print, television or even the Internet, is flooded with advertisements for products and services endorsed by sources that are highly attractive. Marketers targeting their products towards women often use highly attractive sources in their advertisements in an effort to increase the ad's effectiveness (Bower 2001). Marketing literature provides evidence of the positive effects of using highly attractive sources on consumers' evaluations of both the product and the ad (Baker and Churchill 1977; Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamins 1990; Solomon, Ashmore and Longo 1992). However, researchers have been divided in their support for the effectiveness of the use of highly attractive sources in advertisements. For example Bower (2001), Cabellero and Solomon (1984), and Cabellero, Lumpkin, and Madden (1989) have documented the negative effect of using highly attractive sources in advertisements. These studies suggest that such negative effects are due to social comparison, feelings of inadequacy and/or jealousy (Bower 2001, Richins 1991). The research presented here furthers existing literature in this area by investigating the cognitive process underlying the formation of negative attitudes toward advertisements using highly attractive sources.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: It has been suggested that the use of attractive sources in advertisements may result in more favorable attitudes toward the product advertised—either by serving as peripheral cues when elaboration likelihood is low or by providing information central to the merits of the argument when elaboration likelihood is high (Kahle and Homer 1985, Puckett, Petty, Cacioppo, and Fisher 1983; see also Petty, Unnava and Strathman 1991 for a review). Here, we examine how the use of attractive sources in advertisements may result in more negative attitudes by influencing the extent of elaboration itself. Specifically, we draw upon theories of self-concept (e.g., Grub and Grathwohl 1967), comparison and dissatisfaction (e.g., Richins 1991), dual process models of processing (e.g., Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), and preference-inconsistent information processing (e.g., Jain and Maheswaran 2000) to suggest that the relative gap between consumers' perceptions of their own attractiveness and that of the source influences the extent of processing, and thus whether consumers will process the message claims in the advertisements or use attractiveness of the source as peripheral cue in forming attitudes. We suggest that it is not just the absolute level of attractiveness of the source that determines whether consumers form positive or negative attitude towards the advertisement, but also the gap between the perceived self-attractiveness and attractiveness of the source.

Based on this conceptualization, we propose the following hypotheses. First, the use of highly attractive sources in ads will result in a greater gap between self-attractiveness and attractiveness of the source (H_1). Further, the greater the gap between the self-attractiveness and the attractiveness of the source, the greater the processing of ad claims (H_2). Finally, in the case of a weak message, higher gaps will lead to: lower credibility of ad claims (H_{3a}), more negative evaluations of the ad (H_{3b}), and negative evaluations of the brand (H_{3c}).

METHOD: A 2 x 2 x 2 between subjects experiment was conducted with source attractiveness (high/low), message strength (strong/weak), and gender (male/female) as independent variables. The stimulus was an advertisement for a bank. Male participants viewed an advertisement with a male model and female participants viewed an advertisement with a female model. Message strength was manipulated by the text in the ad. Gap was measured as the difference between the perceived self-attractiveness of the participants and that of the source (model featured in the advertisement). The experiment yielded 213 usable responses (113 males and 100 females).

RESULTS: As hypothesized, we found that the use of highly attractive sources in the advertisements resulted in significantly greater gaps as compared to the ads using less attractive sources across male and female participants (H_1 supported). Second, we found that greater gaps between the perceived attractiveness of the self and that of the source leads to more processing of the ad claims for both males and females, as measured by a greater number of thoughts (H_2 supported). Third, we found significant effects of gap and message strength on the credibility of the ad for males but not for females (H_{3a} partially supported). The attitude toward the ad was found to be less favorable when the gap was high for males, while females were only influenced by message strength (H_{3b} partially supported). Finally, the attitude toward the brand was negatively affected by the magnitude of the gap for both males and females (H_{3c} supported).

DISCUSSION: The results of this study indicate that the use of highly attractive sources in advertisements can lead to a gap between perceived image of the self and that of the source, and higher levels of gap motivate consumers to scrutinize and process the ad claims more closely. This study also found significant effects of gap and message strength on advertisement effectiveness measures, showing that it is not the absolute level of attractiveness of the source that may determine the effectiveness of ad but the gap between the perceived attractiveness of the self and that of the source. Unlike previous research that views negative attitude toward advertisements with highly attractive sources as an affective response, this study explains the cognitive process involved in the negative attitude formation.

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The Generation Gap: A Baby Boomer vs. Gen Y Comparison of Religiosity, Consumer Values, and Advertising Appeal Effectiveness

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Marketing academics have increasingly shown an interest in consumer values over the past decade, with materialism garnering most of the research attention (see e.g., Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Richins 1994). Relatively little consumer researcher has been done on religious values, despite the fact that religion is an influential and important aspect of American and many other cultures, impacting consumer attitudes (e.g., towards divorce, music, political issues), values (e.g., altruism, sexual morality, work ethic), and behaviors (e.g., food and alcohol consumption, holiday celebrations, dress) at both the individual and societal levels. (For notable exceptions, see Hirschman 1983; LaBarbera and Gurhan 1997; Wilkes, Burnett, and Howell 1986.) This research attempts to fill some of the gaps in extant knowledge about how religion and other values may influence consumer behavior by examining the relationship between religiosity and materialism, as well as two related sub-values: concern for consumption ethics and value expression through brands. These values are compared across two generations of consumers of high interest to marketers today: Gen Y and Baby Boomers. In addition, this study tests the influence of generation and consumer values on the effectiveness of several types of advertising appeals. With respect to values, members of Generation Y were expected to be more materialistic, more likely to use brands as communication devices, and more concerned about the ethics of consumption as compared to Baby Boomers. Little is known at this point about Generation Y's level of religiosity, so this was an open research question. With respect to appeal types, members of Generation Y were expected to respond more positively to advertising in general, and in particular to image, indulgence, eco, and sex appeals.

The sample for this study consisted of 264 Baby Boomers and 213 members of Generation Y. The method was a pencil and paper experiment in which each participant evaluated four advertisements drawn from the following set: image vs. functional appeals, value vs. indulgence appeals, waste vs. eco appeals, and high sex vs. low sex appeals. In the first three categories, the ads were for either a car (a public, durable product) or for a shampoo (a private, nondurable product). Both sex appeals were for cologne. In all cases, fictitious brand/organization names were used and ad presentation order was rotated and counter-balanced across subjects. Participants' attitudes toward each of the four ads and intention to purchase the advertised product were assessed on ten Likert-type items, all on seven-point scales. Participants also completed multi-item scales to assess individual differences in religiosity, materialism, brand value expressiveness, and consumption ethics, and were asked to report their religious affiliation (if any), gender, age, education, income, and marital status. All multi-item scales were subjected to factor analysis, and composite variables were created for use in further analysis.

The results of the data analysis support the majority of the initial hypotheses. As expected, members of Generation Y were more materialistic and more likely to use brands as communication devices than members of the Baby Boom generation. They were also less significantly less religious on every measure, providing a preliminary answer to this research question. However, there was no significant difference between the two generations in concern regarding the ethics of their consumption practices. With respect to responsiveness to appeal types, Gen Y'ers responded more positively to image, indulge, and sex appeals, as expected. However, they also responded more positively to function appeals, which was not specifically hypothesized, and no difference was found in response to eco, value, or waste appeals between the two generations. In addition, regression analyses were run separately for each of the four consumer values to test the interactions among generation, value, and appeal type factors. Several complex, higher-order interactions were found, but due to space constraints, cannot be discussed here.

This research potentially makes a couple of contributions to the study of consumer values and advertising effectiveness. First, the study examines religiosity and several other consumption-related values in two important generational cohorts to construct a more complete picture of religious consumers as a group. Although materialism and, to a lesser extent, religiosity have both been examined in the literature, the relationship between the two has not yet been fully explored. Furthermore, consumption ethics, its ties to religiosity, and the connection between brand value expressiveness and religiosity are also new to the literature. By explicating these relationships, a clearer picture of how these values relate to consumption may be obtained. Furthermore, the cross-generational nature of this study yields additional insights into these value constellations. Second, this research explores how generation and consumer values impact advertising appeal effectiveness. Studies on appeal effectiveness for different personality types and subcultures have been limited in general, so more