Endorser Influence on Product Judgment and Choice: a Comparative Study of Children and Their Parents

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We examined the extent to which children’s (7-8 year-olds) judgments about the quality of food products are influenced by the same factors as their parents, where the factors manipulated were use of endorsers, brand familiarity, and healthiness of the product. The endorser influence was more widespread in children than in parents where it was confined to healthy, familiar products. However, both children and parents were more influenced by brand familiarity than by endorsers.

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In this paper we will describe the next phase in our longitudinal study of the development of decision-making competence in children (National Science Foundation Grant No. SES07-21103). Whereas earlier phases focused on general decision-making style and riskiness of choice in games of chance, the current research focuses on an important class of real-world judgments and choices, namely the development of product preferences.

There is growing concern about how manufacturers of food products capitalize on the undue influence of favorite cartoon characters as “virtual persons” promoting unhealthy (e.g., sugar-laden) products. Specifically, we focus on the role of endorser influence as a peripheral cue affecting consumer judgments and decisions. Previous research on the general topic of endorser influence has been conducted within the context of Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model which distinguishes between central and peripheral routes to persuasion and considers “need for cognition” as a key individual difference variable. The bulk of this work has been done with adult consumers. We extend this work to children.

As in the earlier phases, the key to this research is developing tasks and measures suitable for both children and adults. In the present case, these developments required the following: 1) selecting both healthy and unhealthy food products used by children and adults; 2)
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collecting normative data to identify favorite cartoon characters as “celebrity endorsers” for the target child group; 3) constructing a children’s version of the Need for Cognition (NFC) scale; 4) using each child’s parent as a “yoked control.”

Research Design

A 2x2x2 factorial design was used to generate 8 unique stimuli (product descriptions) for each child and parent. The factors were whether or not the product’s brand name was familiar, whether or not the product could be classified as “healthy,” and whether or not the product description included a well-known endorser. Each participant received each of the 8 combinations, constructed such that no person received the same brand name or endorser more than once.

Hypotheses

Based on prior research with adults (Homer, & Kahle, 1990; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), the following hypotheses (H) are provided for parents’ data. In addition, a new research question (Q) will be addressed.

H1. Endorser effects should be greater for those scoring low on NFC than for those scoring high.
H2. Endorser effects should be less for known brand names than for unknown brand names.
Q1. How are endorser effects moderated by whether the product falls into the “healthy” or “unhealthy” category?

Q2. Across child-parent pairs, will endorser effects be correlated such that parents who are most susceptible to endorser influence will have children who are similarly inclined?

Method

In the initial phase of the study of decision-making competence, 37 children age 5-7 and 43 children age 8-11, and their parents were administered a risky decision-making task especially designed to determine how riskiness of choice varies in response to contingencies that make risky choices advantageous or disadvantageous in the long run. For the new phase approximately 50 pairs of 7-8 year-old children and their accompanying parent are being recruited through the Child Research Participant Registry of a large midwestern university. Because some of these same children had participated in the initial phase, we will have background material on many of them.

Based on our pilot work, the following “endorsers” were selected for the children: Sponge Bob, Shrek, Scooby-Do, and The Incredibles. Their images were affixed to photos of the product package. Based on published norms of celebrity popularity, the following were selected as adult endorsers: Tiger Wood, Jay Leno, Katherine Heigl, and Adam Sandler. A photo of the endorser and a statement of endorsement appeared next to the photo of the product.

“Healthy” products were breakfast cereals and yogurts; unhealthy products were potato chips and sweet tarts. Within each product category the brand name was either well known or fictitious (ex. Yoplait vs. Emmi Yogurt). Each of the eight product depictions appeared as a separate laminated colored sheet. Participants are asked to rate each one on likeability, desirability and purchase intent. Standard Likert scales are used for adults; previously used frowning/ smiling face scales are used for children.

Adult and child versions of the NFC scale are shown in the appendix. The adult version is the 18-item scale developed by Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao (1984). The child version retains 13 of these items in slightly modified form for each parent to rate her child.

Results and Discussion

The current results will add to our existing data which show that: 1) The decision-making style of young children age 5-7 closely adheres to that of their parents but diverges as they get older (8-11). 2) Younger children’s choices are less affected by risk level than are older children’s or adults’. 3) Children make riskier choices than their parents but their riskiness is moderated by dispositional traits such as “surgery”.

We expect data collection and analysis for the new phase to be completed by the beginning of the summer. Among the more important results we are expecting are that children will be more susceptible to endorser effects than adults, that the effects in children will be less subject to the moderating influences of brand familiarity and healthiness, but that there will be a relationship between child and parent susceptibility. Such results will advance our understanding of children as consumers and will provide guidelines for identifying the profile of children especially susceptible to adverse advertising influences.

References


APPENDIX

Need for Cognition Scale (Adults)

Write in the number that best fits your view:

1 2 3 4
completely mostly mostly completely
true true false false

1. I would prefer complex to simple problems.
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun.
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.
5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely chance I will have to think in depth about something.
6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.
7. I only think as hard as I have to.
8. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones.
9. I like tasks that require little thought once I’ve learned them.
10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.
11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
12. Learning new ways to think doesn’t excite me very much.
13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.
14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.
15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.
16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.
17. It’s enough for me that something gets the job done; I don’t care how or why it works.
18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.

Need for Cognition Scale (Parental report of their children)

Now we are going to ask you similar questions about your child. Please write in the number that best fits your view:

1 2 3 4
completely mostly mostly completely
true true false false

1. My child prefers complex to simple problems.
2. My child likes to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my child’s idea of fun.
4. My child would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge his or her thinking abilities.
5. My child tries to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely chance that he or she will have to think in depth about something.
6. My child thinks only as hard as he or she has to.
7. My child prefers to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones.
8. My child likes tasks that require little thought once he or she has learned them.
9. My child really enjoys a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
10. Learning new ways to think doesn’t excite my child very much.
11. My child prefers his or her life to be filled with puzzles to solve.
12. My child feels relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.
13. It’s enough for my child that something gets the job done; he or she doesn’t care how or why it works.