Age-related features of the face act as environmental cues that are used by others to guide socially and biologically functional behavior. A series of studies examine how the perceived age of a referent affects interpersonal influence. We find that age-related inferences of competence and judgments of facial maturity make older individuals more influential than younger individuals in domains related to factual information and values. Sexual appeal affects influence related to style, and as a result, young adults are most influential in this domain, followed by teens, then mid-age adults and children.

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The Effect of Referent Age on Interpersonal Influence in Domains Related to Factual Information, Values, and Style

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The effect of referent age on interpersonal influence is explored in a series of studies. Researchers commonly assume that individuals are more influenced by someone who is of the same gender, race, and age than by those who are different on these dimensions (Chang 2008; Tajfel and Turner 1986). However, a critical evaluation of age as a construct reveals that in some situations this characteristic may have a unique effect on influence that is not well understood. Chronological age may be especially relevant when assessing persuasive messages since this characteristic is easily inferred and age-related features likely act as environmental cues that guide socially and biologically functional behavior (Montepare and Zebrowitz 1998).

Despite the logical connection between referent age and influence, very little is known about this subject beyond the work on similarity. One study that explored this topic found that advertisements featuring elderly models negatively affected retail patronage intentions for young adults for conspicuous services, but not inconspicuous services (Day and Stafford 1998). Though these findings are informative, much more research is needed in order to develop a deep and insightful understanding of how an important and pervasive social cue such as age affects interpersonal influence.

Although the effect of age on interpersonal influence has been largely neglected, some insight is offered by research that focuses on how trait inferences that are indirectly linked to age affect judgments and decisions. Research on inferences of competence stands out as particularly relevant to how people may respond when faced with messages that pertain to factual information or values since inferences of competence emerge as a universal dimension of social cognition that influences important decisions and social judgments (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007). Importantly, researchers draw a connection between inferences of competence and facial maturity (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2005) and the positive consequences of facial maturity and competence have been observed in numerous contexts including the public image of chief executive officers (Gorn et al. 2008).

A connection between chronological age and judgments of competence and facial maturity exists because older individuals are generally perceived as more competent with more mature features than younger individuals; however older individuals can possess more babyish features and be perceived as less competent as well. Nevertheless, differences in these trait inferences are likely to be ascribed to different age groups which should affect how people respond to messages pertaining to factual information and values. Influence in matters pertaining to factual information was first assessed in Study 1 by asking participants to rate whether they would consider the opinions of referents in regards to facts and statistics (referents varied on age; children of 10 years, teen-ages of 17 years, young adults of 25, and mid-aged adults of 45 years). Study 2 evaluated the effect of referent age on messages related to values and ethics in a consumer context. In this study participants selected a brand based on value-related recommendations. The effect of referent age on messages related to factual information was also assessed in a consumer context. In study 3 participants evaluated brands of enhanced bottled water based on referent claims related to technical aspects of the water (e.g., antioxidants). In each study, the older referents were more influential than younger referents and this effect was mediated by judgments related to competence and facial maturity.

When messages relate to style, characteristics other than competence and facial maturity are likely to be relevant since style is about appearance and looks. In this domain, creating an appearance that is highly valued in society is socially and biologically functional according to sexual selection theory and empirical evidence, society values physical attributes that signal high reproductive value (Jones 1996). Importantly, reproductive health and fertility largely depend on age and the key features of physical attractiveness reflect fertility which peaks in young adulthood around 25 years of age (e.g., ideal waist-to-hip ratios and facial proportions) (Jones 1996). The reproductive status of this age group is also connected to their heightened concern over appearance and fashion, and, as a result, young adults may make good sources for determining what is stylish and fashionable (Berger 2008; Biddle and Mutrie 2001). With this in mind, people should be more open to messages related to style and taste when the source is a young adult since creating an image and appearance like these individuals is functional. This reasoning extends to teens as well since the teenage years are also marked by high levels of reproductive value, albeit to a lesser extent than young adults (Jones 1996). To test the assumption that age and sexual appeal relate to style-related influence, participants were asked to choose a brand based on referent recommendations in terms of what is stylish and unique (Study 2). As hypothesized, young adults were most influential, followed by teens, then middle age adults and children and this effect was mediated by sexual appeal.

These results indicate that individuals use the perceived age of a referent as a proxy for expertise when evaluating information even in situations in which there is no direct connection between a referent’s age and actual expertise and all referents state precisely the same product claim. The findings are substantively useful as marketing practitioners can use this information to choose a spokesperson or model that best fits the desired message. The findings are also theoretically important as they illustrate how fundamental environmental cues influence judgments and decisions.

REFERENCES


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