Symbolic Interactionism and Adolescent Reactions to Cigarette Advertisements

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Does restricting the age of models in cigarette advertising to 25 years or older really work in deterring adolescents from smoking? It is important to understand how the characteristics of cigarette ad models, such as age, influence teen behavior. Based on symbolic interactionism theory, the authors conducted three experiments to examine how altering age of models used in cigarette advertising affects whether adolescents are drawn to or deterred from smoking. Adolescents exhibited a boomerang effect when exposed to teen cigarette models, lowering intent to smoke, while exposure to young adult cigarette models increased intent to smoke.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Underpinnings of Risky Behavior: Non-health Motives for Health-related Behaviors
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumers often know of risks to themselves, but fail to act in ways to reduce these risks (Verplanken and Wood 2006; Thaler and Sunstein 2008). In their comprehensive review of the literature on health risk perceptions literature published in the Handbook of Consumer Psychology, Menon, Raghubir, and Nidhi Agrawal (2008) persuasively argue that there is a need to identify “antecedents other than cognitive belief-based ones.” They identify a wealth of motivational, affective, individual, contextual, and disease factors that have been studied and how they relate these to consumer outcomes. Within the specific category of motivation, they discuss theoretical work on self-control, self-positivity, and social desirability. The papers in this proposed session share a focus on motivational antecedents for behaviors, but are guided by theoretical frameworks that have been under-explored in the health context: hypocrisy theory, associative processing of others’ motivations, and symbolic interactionism.

This session brings together rigorous research relevant to understanding consumers’ motivations for engaging in desirable and non-desirable social outcomes. More broadly, the authors in these studies take novel theoretical and methodological approaches within the context of motivation, persuasion, and consumer attitudes and behavior. Bundling these papers together is intended to stimulate discussion and to explore ideas for future research, perhaps beyond the health context. We will build in time to discuss each paper immediately after it has been presented. The audience for this session would likely include researchers interested in the self, motivation, persuasion, transformative consumer research, and public policy topics.

The first paper is co-authored by Jeff Stone (Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Arizona), who has published numerous studies on cognitive dissonance in high-impact journals such as Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, and his doctoral student Nicholas Fernandez, also at the University of Arizona. Their work examines the use of inducing cognitive dissonance via hypocrisy to achieve desirable health outcomes. The second paper is co-authored by Merrie Brucks (Professor of Marketing at the University of Arizona), Paul Connell (Assistant Professor of Marketing at Stony Brook University) and Dan Freeman (Associate Professor of Marketing at University of Delaware). In this paper, the authors find that children ascribe motivations to smoke or not to smoke at a very early age, even though they cannot articulate the reasoning behind these motivations. The final paper is co-authored by Connie Pechmann (Professor of Marketing at the University of California, Irvine), Dante Pirouz (Doctoral Student at the University of California, Irvine), and Todd Pezzuti (Doctoral Student at the University of California, Irvine). Across three experiments, the authors find that when teens are exposed to advertisements featuring young adult models, they actually have higher intentions to smoke than when exposed to advertisements featuring other teens, as teens see cigarettes as a means of communicating an adult identity.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Use of Hypocrisy to Motivate Health Attitude and Behavior Change”
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Nicholas C. Fernandez, University of Arizona, USA

This presentation examines the use of the hypocrisy strategy as a social-marketing tool for changing consumer health behaviors. Feelings of hypocrisy occur when people make a public statement about the importance of a target health behavior, such as using condoms to prevent sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS (Stone et al. 1994, 1997), quitting smoking (Peterson et al. 2008), or using sunscreen to reduce the risk for skin cancer (Fernandez et al. 2009). By itself, the advocacy is consistent with prevailing attitudes beliefs about the issue, and does not cause discomfort. However, when people are then made mindful that they themselves have not performed the behavior regularly in the past, the discrepancy between their advocacy and past behavior causes the discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance. To reduce their discomfort, hypocrites become motivated to “practice what they preach” and take the necessary steps toward bringing their own health behavior in line with their “preaching” about the importance of the standards for good health.

A recent review of the hypocrisy literature (Stone and Fernandez 2008) shows that there are over 20 studies of the effect of hypocrisy on motivating consumer behavior change in the domains of health, the environment and the community. The results of these studies indicate that following hypocrisy, people are most motivated to perform the target behavior when they publically advocate the target behavior and then are privately made mindful of past recent failures to perform the behavior. Studies also indicate that the hypocrisy strategy operates effectively to modify behavior in non-Western cultures (Takaku 2001, 2006).

Recent empirical research focuses on changing behaviors related to the risk for cancer (Fernandez et al. 2009). A new line of study examines how much “mindfulness” of past failures is necessary to motivate behavioral change following hypocrisy. According to Festinger (1957), the magnitude of dissonance is highest when more inconsistent than consistent cognitions are present in memory. In the case of hypocrisy, this implies that after advocating the target health behavior, recalling many past failures will cause more dissonance and more behavior change. However, recent research on the role of self-validation in ease-of-retrieval processes (Tormala et al. 2007) suggests that when advocates are asked to recall past instances of when they failed to perform the behavior, they may also recruit examples of when they successfully performed the behavior, especially when they are motivated and have the ability to think carefully about the past (i.e., high elaboration). The “self-validation” process predicts that if advocates carefully recall both failures and successes, it could balance the ratio of inconsistent to consistent cognitions, which would reduce the level of dissonance and need to change behavior following hypocrisy. This leads to the counter-intuitive prediction that when advocates think carefully as they recall past failures to perform the target health behavior, recalling fewer past failures may reduce the number of successes that are also recalled, such that recalling fewer
past failures will cause more dissonance and more behavior change. Thus, it was predicted that under high elaboration conditions, when advocates were asked to recall many past failures to perform a health behavior, the self-validation process would reduce the magnitude of dissonance and the motivation to change behavior. However, carefully recalling few past failures would reduce the self-validation process and cause more dissonance and behavioral change following hypocrisy.

In contrast, it was hypothesized that when they are not highly motivated to think about past failures (i.e., low elaboration), advocates will focus primarily on the number of failures recalled without recruiting other relevant information (e.g., successes). As a result, under low elaboration, recalling many past failures will induce more dissonance and behavioral change following hypocrisy than recalling few past failures. In summary, we predicted that under high elaboration, advocates who think about few past failures will exhibit more behavior change, but under low elaboration, advocates who think about many past failures will exhibit more behavior change.

In a 2 (Elaboration: High vs. low) X 2 (Past failures: 2 vs. 8) experimental design, 90 female college students wrote a brief persuasive message for other college students about the importance of using sunscreen to reduce the risk for skin cancer. All were then asked to report past failures to use sunscreen. To manipulate high elaboration (Tormala, Brinol, and Petty 2007), half were told that only a few people were being asked to report information about past failures to use sunscreen; those in the low elaboration condition were told that thousands of people were reporting information about past failures to use sunscreen. Then half were asked to recall 2 past failures to use sunscreen whereas the other half were asked to recall 8 past failures to use sunscreen. All were then provided an opportunity to order a sample of sunscreen from an independent national organization, with the percentage that acquired sunscreen as the primary dependent measure.

The results revealed the predicted elaboration X past recall interaction. As hypothesized, under conditions of high elaboration, significantly more participants (82%) acquired a sample of sunscreen when they were asked to recall 2 past failures compared to those asked to recall 8 past failures. In contrast, under low elaboration, significantly more participants (68%) acquired a sample of sunscreen when asked to recall 8 past failures compared to those asked to recall 2 past failures (39%). Overall, the pattern supports the hypothesis that in hypocrisy, the effect of recalling many past failures on behavior change is a function of how carefully advocates think about their past behavior. Potential mediators of this finding and other future directions for research will be discussed.

References
underpinning of risky behavior: non-health motives for health-related behaviors

We conducted 271 projective interviews with second and fifth grade children from three different elementary schools. Two varieties of projective stimuli were used to elicit participant responses: print advertisements and pictures of people who have various personal and lifestyle characteristics. Each child saw two ads for cigarettes, which were embedded in a series of five ads (including three unrelated products). For each ad, children were asked to choose select pictures of specific people who might be likely or unlikely to use that product. Each child was probed with follow up questions to reveal the motivations he or she attributed to these people.

In the presentation, we will show: (1) the three images that were most strongly associated with smoking, as these images were attributed with multiple motives for smoking; (2) the four images that were also associated with smoking, and were attributed with one or two motives for smoking; (3) the six images that were strongly associated with non-smoking, and were attributed with motives for non-smoking; and (4) four images that were inconsistently associated with smoking, and were attributed with motives for both smoking and non-smoking. Typically, the second graders had difficulty in articulating these motives, often with responses such as “s/he just looks like s/he would smoke.” Therefore, the emergent themes were drawn largely from the fifth grade interview dataset. Nevertheless, the second graders often made many of the same lifestyle associations as the fifth graders. Chi-square analysis of the pattern of picture selections indicated that they associated the same images with smoking and non-smoking as the fifth graders did.

Qualitative data analysis revealed three broad areas of motives attributed to the characters in the images: social motives, esteem motives, and relaxation motives. Themes within the social motive included smoking for fun in social situations and smoking to impress others, whereas themes within the esteem motive primarily included issues with weight and thinness. Themes within the relaxation motive primarily included needing to escape one’s troubles or smoking for leisure. Finally, for one of the images, general inactivity or lack of motivation in general was associated with smoking.

We argue that the similarity of lifestyle picture selections and attributed motivations between the second and fifth graders, in combination with the non-verbal nature of the second graders’ associations, suggests that children did not purposefully and thoughtfully develop them. This pattern of data is consistent with the associative processing model of memory, in which advertisements, media images, and personal observations are encoded into memory preconsciously through associative processing.

References

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Does restricting the age of models in cigarette advertising to 25 years or older really work in deterring adolescents from smoking? Health researchers and advocates have stressed the importance of using only adult models in cigarette ads because younger models might entice adolescents to believe that smoking is for them. As a result, there have been a number of regulatory attempts to specify the minimum age of models in cigarette ads (Richards, Tye, and Fischer 1996). For example, the Voluntary Cigarette Advertising and Promotion Code, which tobacco manufacturers claim to use as a guideline, states that “any models used in advertising be and appear to be older than 25” (The Tobacco Institute 1990, p. 1).

Previous academic literature has focused on the perception of model age in cigarette advertising and has shown that people perceive many cigarette ad models to be younger than 25 (Arnett 2005; Barbeau et al. 1998; Mazis et al. 1992). However, these studies have not linked model age to persuasion nor have they studied the effect of manipulating model age.

Similarity-based theories, such as social comparison (Festinger 1954) and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986), predict that consumers are more influenced by similar others (White and Dahl 2006). A major implication is that ad models should mirror the target audience and teens are more likely to be persuaded by models of their own age than by older or younger ones. However, these theories have focused on normative influence and have not addressed aspirational or symbolic factors. On the other hand, symbolic interactionism focuses on how people interpret, act towards, and give meaning to symbolic objects, events and situations around them (Blumer 1969; Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2003; Solomon 1983; Stryker 1980). Symbols acquire meaning through socialization and products that function as symbols can carry potent information about an individual’s social role and status (Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003).

Age is a powerful indicator of social role and status (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). Across life stages, products are used as symbols to signify to the self and others the transition to a new developmental level (Peterson and Peters 1983; Piacentini and Mailer 2004). Many adolescents have a fragile and unstable self-concept which leads them to aspire to look and act older (Barker and Galambos 2005; Galambos, Turner, and Tilton-Weaver 2005). Thus, products with specific social meaning can be used to facilitate the transition but the imagery and symbolism surrounding the product must appropriately signal adulthood (Berger and Rand 2008; Solomon 1983).

Cigarettes belong to a unique class of products that are a key identity signal of adulthood (Eckert 1983). Unlike other publicly consumed products, such as music and clothing, smoking symbolizes the adult world and is taboo for adolescents and children in most cultures (Rugkasa et al. 2001). Thus many adolescents seek out conspicuous symbols of adulthood, such as cigarettes, to reinforce their pseudomature identity and help them bridge the gap to adulthood (Eckert 2007; Galambos and Tilton-Weaver 2000; Noble and Walker 1997). For adolescents, this may have an unexpected influence on their response to cigarette advertising featuring models of their own age.

Our theoretical framework predicts that for an adult-signaling product category like cigarettes, young adult models would influence adolescents more positively than same age models. It also predicts that teenage or same age models might, in fact, boomerang. However, for other product categories such as clothing, teen models...
would be more influential than young adults. These effects would be mediated by what the model’s age communicates about the product, for example, age appropriateness. Theory would also predict that because adolescence is a period of transition, only teens would be susceptible to the teenage model boomerang effect but young adults would not be.

In a series of experiments, we investigated how altering the age of models used in cigarette advertising affects whether adolescents are drawn to—or deterred from—smoking. We pretested over 1000 model images to choose a set of 16 advertising models that were equally attractive but varied on gender (2 levels), ethnicity (2 levels) and age (4 levels: child, teen, young adult and middle age). We then conducted the first study with 221 ninth grade students who rated the model images. We manipulated whether the models held cigarettes or not. As hypothesized, we found that adolescent participants identified most with teen and young adult models, suggesting that they are most likely to be influenced by these age groups.

A second study investigated how cigarette model age might affect persuasion. Participants were 479 ninth grade students who viewed a mock-up magazine containing cigarette ads or matched control ads. The ad models’ age was manipulated. The teenage cigarette models boomeranged, lowering intent to smoke. The young adult cigarette models increased intent to smoke, while child and middle-aged cigarette models had no effect on intent. We repeated this experiment using 284 college students who were 18-21 years old. As predicted, the cigarette models had null effects because young adults do not need cigarettes to signal an adult identity.

A third study examined whether the age effects were moderated by product category and also explored the underlying process by identifying mediators. Participants were 278 ninth grade students who were shown a magazine with cigarette ads or designer t-shirt ads. The ad models’ age was manipulated. As posited, participants perceived cigarettes (vs. designer t-shirts) as more for public display, more reflective of “who the person is,” and more “for adults.” The cigarette ads also affected both product category (primary) and brand specific (secondary) demand. Specifically, teen versus young adult cigarette ad models lowered cigarette product and brand intent, as hypothesized. The effect of ad model age on intent to use the cigarette product and brand was at least partially mediated by age appropriateness perceptions. Teen (versus young adult) cigarette models decreased perceptions that cigarettes were an appropriate teenage product, which then lowered intent to use cigarettes.

References