Learning About the Self Through Advertising: the Effect of Behaviorally-Targeted Advertising on Consumer Self-Perceptions and Behavior

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The authors demonstrate that behaviorally-targeted advertising changes consumers’ beliefs about themselves. These self-perceptions not only affect purchase intentions, but also actions related to the trait learned from the behaviorally-targeted ad. Such learning about the self depends on consumers’ awareness that the ad is targeted and their liking of targeted ads.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Behavioral targeting” is an Internet-based advertising strategy that uses a consumer’s online actions to tailor digital ads for that person. Despite its tremendous growth and effectiveness in the marketplace, important questions about this strategy remain, including: (1) are behaviorally-targeted ads more effective than non-targeted ads under all conditions? and (2) what is the psychological process driving increased effectiveness of behaviorally-targeted ads? This research seeks to answer both of these questions.

People seek information about themselves from a variety of sources (Baumeister 1998; Wu, Cutright, and Fitzsimons 2011). While the specific reasons vary across people and contexts, it is clear that consumers are quite sensitive to learning new information about themselves (Coleman and Williams 2013; Sedikides and Strube 1997). This sensitivity can make individuals’ perceptions about themselves remarkably malleable, opening the door for marketers to shape self-views. For example, marketers can reinforce the implications of consumer behavior (see Self-perception Theory: Bem 1967) through “social labeling.” Labeling entails classifying individuals, purportedly on the basis of their behavior, in the hope that they will later act in a manner consistent with that characterization (Tybout and Yalcı 1980). We propose that behaviorally-targeted ads can act like a social label, reinforcing the implications of past actions and changing consumers’ beliefs about themselves because they believe the targeting algorithm’s conclusion that they are the type of person who would enjoy the product. We predict that this learning will be sensitive to two moderators.

First, consumers have to recognize an ad as behaviorally targeted. It is only when a consumer recognizes an ad as behaviorally targeted that it becomes self-relevant; by definition, it is due to something the consumer did. Without being designated, targeted advertisements can be qualitatively identical to ads that are not targeted and the consumer would not interpret the ad as a social label.

Second, self-perception changes will depend on the extent to which consumers like behaviorally-targeted ads. As with other forms of persuasive communication, advertisements may be evaluated based on who is delivering the message and how that source is perceived (Chaiken 1980; McGuire 1978). Liked sources are seen as more credible and result in more compliant behavioral responses (Crano 1970) and persuasion (Porntitakpan 2004; Tybout and Yalcı 1980). Thus, when consumers like targeted ads, they trust them as valid sources of information and respond accordingly, altering their self-perceptions and consumer behavior to be consistent with the implications of the ad, especially when the traits implied by the ad are positive.

Study 1 showed that consumers learn about themselves from ads identified as behaviorally-targeted and that this learning is sensitive to two important moderators. Within a 2 (Advertised product: sophisticated vs. unsophisticated) x 2 (Ad identified as behaviorally-targeted: yes vs. no) x 2 (Ad identified as behaviorally-targeted: yes vs. no) x 2 (Advertised restaurant: sophisticated vs. unsophisticated) between-subjects design, participants completed a shopping task and were told that they would view an advertisement. Half were told that this ad was “targeted” from the shopping task, while the other half were not. An advertisement for a sophisticated or unsophisticated product was then presented, after which participants rated their self-sophistication. Changes in self-perceptions only occurred when the ad conveyed a positive message about the self. This research provides several important theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on self-learning (e.g., Wu, Cutright, and Fitzsimons 2011) by demonstrating that behaviorally-targeted ads are a powerful source of self-learning, serving as a social label. Second, we add to the social labeling literature (Kraut 1973) by showing that social labels conveying positive traits are significantly more effective than are social labels implying negative or neutral self-information. Finally, our findings also complement the literature on influencing consumers to “go green” (e.g., Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008; Trudel and Argo 2014) by exploring behaviorally-targeted ads as a novel method for encouraging environmentally-friendly actions.
REFERENCES


