

Research Article

The effects of advertising models for age-restricted products and self-concept discrepancy on advertising outcomes among young adolescents

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Abstract

Research on discrepancies between the actual self and ideal self has examined self-discrepancies in knowledge, skills and stature but age-based self-discrepancies have only recently received attention and so we studied this phenomenon in young adolescents. In three studies we identified a product-category contextual cue that apparently caused adolescents to respond to an existing age-based self-discrepancy. Specifically we found that when the contextual cue was advertising for an age-restricted product, adolescents conformed to dissimilar young adult advertising models and diverged from similar adolescent models. This indicated that the contextual cue caused them to respond to an age-based self-discrepancy and use a product associated with the ideal self rather than the actual self. Importantly, this response was stronger among adolescents that were more dissatisfied with their age. With advertising for an age-unrestricted product, adolescents conformed to adolescent advertising models and diverged from young adult models. Industry policies for age-restricted products assume that similarity drives influence and therefore mandate that advertising models be young adults rather than adolescents. Our findings suggest this assumption is invalid for age-restricted products.

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Introduction

Recent research has uncovered novel ways that consumers respond to self-discrepancies, i.e., discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves. Packard and Wooten (2013) found that self-discrepancies in product knowledge increased word-of-mouth communication. Sobol and Darke (2014) showed that self-discrepancies in professional stature caused consumers to engage in fluid compensation improving their performance in other domains. Here we focus on age self-discrepancies because they have not received much attention but seem quite pervasive among certain groups, especially young adolescents (Barker & Galambos, 2005; Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987) and seniors (e.g., Saucier, 2004; Weiss & Lang, 2012).

We develop and test a conceptual framework about adolescent self-discrepancy related to age and the effect this may have on adolescents' response to the age of advertising models. The framework posits that, in advertising, an age-restricted product can serve as a contextual cue that elicits self-discrepancy responses and causes divergence from similarly-aged advertising models. In contrast, an age-unrestricted product can serve as a contextual cue that elicits self-congruency responses and causes conformity to similarly-aged advertising models.

Understanding how adolescents respond to the age of advertising models for age-restricted products is substantively important. For decades, the tobacco and alcohol industries have agreed to use models that appear to be 25 years of age or older to avoid criticism that their advertising increases adolescent intent to smoke and drink (Beer Institute, 2006; Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, 2011; Tobacco Institute, 1990; Wine Institute, 2011). This policy is based on the assumption that model-viewer similarity drives social influence. However

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this policy may actually be misguided because, in our three studies, similarity did not drive social influence for the age-restricted product; dissimilarity did.

Conceptual framework

The self-concept is the set of beliefs one maintains about oneself (Howard, 2000; Oyserman, 2009) and it includes the actual self, i.e., the set of beliefs about who one actually is, and the ideal self, i.e., the set of beliefs about who one would ideally like to be (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Considering that the self-concept is often based on domain-specific self-beliefs, consumers can have an ideal self that resembles the actual self in some domains but not others. For instance, a consumer may see themselves as intelligent which may reflect an ideal self, but that same consumer may have an ideal-actual self-discrepancy on age or attractiveness.

Since self-discrepancies arouse negative affect and threaten self-esteem (Higgins, 1987), consumers may avoid facing such discrepancies (Weiss & Lang, 2012). Also since self-discrepancies create tension, consumers may be motivated to relieve this tension by trying to reduce the discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). Specifically consumers may engage in behaviors that reflect the ideal self rather than the actual self because over time this should bring the actual self in closer to the ideal self thus reducing the self-discrepancy (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

One key factor in determining whether consumers will respond to a self-discrepancy is the presence of a contextual cue related to that discrepancy. Boldero and Francis (2000), for instance, found that the location (home versus university) where a self-discrepancy was assessed had a larger effect on self-discrepancy responses as compared to other factors such as the importance of attaining the ideal self or the centrality of the domain to the self-definition.

We sought to identify contextual cues that may cause young adolescents to respond to an existing age-based self-discrepancy. Adolescents are especially likely to experience an age-based self-discrepancy because they are in a transition phase to young adulthood and are waiting to achieve the independence, freedom, and other ideals that young adulthood brings (Barker & Galambos, 2005; Cantor et al., 1987). However, most research on age-based discrepancies has focused on seniors' desire to be younger (e.g., Saucier, 2004; Weiss & Lang, 2012).

Instead, we examine adolescents' age-related self-discrepancy and how this may affect how they respond to age-restricted product advertising featuring models of different ages. Since previous research has shown that consumers respond to self-discrepancies when contextual cues are present (Boldero & Francis, 2000), adolescents may be more likely to respond to self-discrepancies when exposed to an advertisement for an age-restricted product that they are unable to purchase legally because they are too young. Indeed the inability to purchase a product is perceived as a threat to one's self-concept (Moore & Fitzsimons, 2014).

Advertisements often persuade by creating favorable associations between ad models and products (McCracken, 1989; Silvera & Austad, 2004). When a contextual cue such as advertising for an age-restricted product is present, adolescents' desire to use the product may depend on the characteristics of the advertising

model relative to the adolescents' self-concept. Adolescent models are similar to adolescent viewers and therefore possess characteristics associated with the actual self. Young adult models are youthful and yet have the independence and freedom that adolescents strive for; thus they possess characteristics associated with the ideal self (Arnett, 2000; Barker & Galambos, 2005). Middle-aged adults lack the youthfulness of adolescents and young adults and are, therefore, removed from the adolescent self-concept.

Several predictions arise from our conceptual framework. The first prediction is that when a contextual cue such as advertising for an age-restricted product is present, adolescents may desire to use products associated with the relevant ideal self; because behaving like the ideal self may help to move the actual self towards the ideal self. Potentially relevant to the ideal self, young adult advertising models are youthful but they also have the independence and freedom to purchase age-restricted products. Thus adolescents may conform to young adult advertising models and increase their product-use intent.

A second prediction is that, since the actual self reflects an undesirable state when self-discrepancies are present (Higgins, 1987), adolescents may diverge from similar adolescent advertising models when a contextual cue such as advertising for an age-restricted product is present, i.e., they may decrease their product-use intent. Consumers avoid undesirable selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Norman & Aron, 2003) and one way of doing this may be to avoid products associated with an undesirable self. In effect, in such cases, dissimilarity may drive conformity and similarity may drive divergence (c.f., Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Hilmert, Kulik, & Christenfeld, 2006). Furthermore, since consumers are influenced by marketing communications that are relevant to the self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995), middle-aged adult models may not affect adolescents. Formally:

H1. When adolescents view ads for an age-restricted product, adolescent advertising models will decrease product-use intent relative to young adult or middle-aged adult models; and additionally young adult models will increase product-use intent relative to middle-aged adult models not just adolescent models.

H2. When adolescents view ads for an age-restricted product, adolescent advertising models will decrease product-use intent, young adult models will increase product-use intent, and middle-aged adult models will have no effect, relative to a control ad.

Our framework does not suggest that adolescent conformity to dissimilar young adult models is a general response that occurs simply because they want to be older. Instead, this response is elicited by contextual cues such as advertisements for age-restricted products. Adolescents may respond differently to advertisements for products they consider relevant to the self, e.g., t-shirts or other clothing, when contextual cues related to self-discrepancies are absent. In such cases, consumers may respond to the need for consistency by preferring products that are congruent with how they actually see themselves (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). Specifically, advertising for products that adolescents consider relevant to the self but

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