



Development of a scale to measure skepticism of social advertising among adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 September 2008

Accepted 14 October 2008

Keywords:

Ad skepticism
Social marketing
Teenagers
Peer influence
Adolescents

ABSTRACT

A significant amount of research has looked at the effectiveness of social marketing to teenagers, but teenagers' skeptical response to social advertising has not been considered. In this study, we review the relevant literature, develop a measure of social advertising skepticism with desirable psychometric properties, and show that social ad skepticism is distinct from the (commercial) ad skepticism that has been previously studied. We also develop a model of the antecedents and correlates of social advertising skepticism and test it using a sample of high-school students. Our results show that peer influence and reactance play a prominent role in an adolescent's skepticism of social and commercial ads. They also show that skeptical attitudes toward social ads are significantly correlated with reduced perceptions of the risks of some behaviors.

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Children and young adults have long been recognized as representing an important demographic in consumer markets. As a consequence, it is estimated that children are exposed to more than 40,000 commercials per year (Kunkel et al., 2004), and teens who watch 16 to 17 h of television per week (Strasburger and Donnerstein, 1999) are likely to see even more commercials. But children and teens are also an important audience for social marketers, since they are faced with difficult choices regarding behaviors such as smoking and drinking. Accordingly, more than 21 U.S. states ran paid anti-smoking ads targeted at youths in 2002 (Pechmann et al., 2003). Still, it is believed that many of the social marketing efforts aimed at informing teens and discouraging risky behaviors have failed or have produced unintended consequences (Hastings et al., 2004).

Social marketers have often relied on the shock impact of fear appeals to convey their message to target audiences. For instance, anti-smoking campaigns use fear appeals to warn consumers about the dangers of using tobacco products. However, research has shown that such scare-tactics may provoke viewers to respond with defense mechanisms such as changing channels, refusing to believe the message, or scoffing at the threat warning in the message (Keller and Goldberg-Block, 1996).

In this study, our area of concern is with one possible response that advertising may elicit from adolescents, namely ad skepticism. Skepticism of (commercial) advertising has been defined as the "tendency toward disbelief of ad claims" (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998), and has also been addressed by other researchers (c.f. Boush et al., 1994; Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998). However, no studies that we know of

have looked at skepticism of social advertising. Additionally, it has been noted that most research concerned with young people's beliefs about advertising has focused on children ages 2–11, with older children relatively neglected (Boush et al., 1994). Taken together, this suggests that there is a need for a better understanding of adolescents' skepticism of social (as opposed to commercial) advertising.

In this study, we attempt to make a contribution by developing a measure of social advertising skepticism and demonstrating its validity, including discriminant validity from measures of commercial ad skepticism. We also investigate the antecedents and correlates of social ad skepticism among adolescents: Specifically, the effects of peer influence, parental influence, and personality variables. Our research should help practitioners understand how social advertising to adolescents can be made more effective, and present them with a valid scale for measuring social ad skepticism. It should also facilitate further research in this area, including studies investigating the effects of different types of ad messages on adolescents.

1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Although various attempts have been made to define ad skepticism, a common thread that runs among the various existing definitions of ad skepticism is that of trust. Indeed, ad skepticism often refers to the consumer's lack of trust in advertising (Boush et al., 1993, 1994; Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998). Ford et al. (1990) reviewed consumer skepticism from the viewpoint of information economics and sought to show that ad claims higher in subjective, experiential and credence attributes would generate greater levels of ad skepticism than would objective claims. While most of their propositions were supported, they nevertheless called for further research to address whether skepticism should be considered unidimensional. This issue has been a controversial one. Although it is clear that a consumer can

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be skeptical of ad claims (Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998; Boush et al., 1994), disagreement centers on whether or not ad skepticism should be conceptualized so as to also include the mistrust of an advertiser's motives or dislike of the intrusive nature of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998).

Boush et al. (1994) found that their items designed to measure ad skepticism did not yield an unidimensional solution but rather a two-dimensional one, with the dimensions interpretable as mistrust of advertiser motives and disbelief in ad claims. They acknowledge concern about the factor solution representing a measurement artifact due to all the items loading on the 'disbelief in ad claims' factor being the negatively worded ones (reflecting lower skepticism) — nevertheless, they find the two-dimensional solution to be conceptually persuasive. Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) concur with Boush et al. (1994), seeing ad skepticism in terms of the perceived motivation of advertisers as well as the claims made by them, although they actually assess ad skepticism using a 4-item scale based on Gaski and Etzel's (1986) measure of sentiment to advertising.

These views of ad skepticism run contrary to that of Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), who see ad skepticism as unidimensional and referring to a consumer's tendency toward the disbelief of advertising claims. The latter authors maintain that a consumer's skeptical attitudes are limited to the sense of disbelief, and ad skepticism is a completely separate construct from a general attitude toward advertising, noting that: "one may dislike advertising because one is skeptical of it, but skepticism and general attitude are conceptually separate" (p. 160). Similarly, Hardesty et al. (2002) observed that the message source consists of a contextual variable that can be manipulated independently of ad claims, and should not be considered a dimension of ad skepticism. It appears that regarding ad skepticism as multidimensional takes into account factors related to ad skepticism, rather than dimensions inherent to ad skepticism. Thus, the Boush et al. (1994) ad skepticism measure may be most relevant in assessing attitudes toward corporate image advertising, or claims of corporate social responsibility. Our interest in this study is different. Hence, we define social ad skepticism simply as a consumer's tendency toward the disbelief of social advertising claims.

1.1. Peer influence

While peer influence is an important factor in how adolescents learn to process advertising and become consumers, the extant research on peer influence is limited (c.f. John, 1999). Looking first at teens' learning about deviant behaviors, social learning theory posits that adolescents learn about such behaviors through the information that is provided to them by their peers and parents — primary groups — as well as by the mass media, a secondary group (Akers and Lee, 1996). For instance, this theory proposes that teens will be more likely to take up the habit of smoking if they affiliate with people who are smokers and who hold favorable attitudes toward smoking. It is contended that among the different information sources available, adolescents prefer their peers and friends over both mass media and their parents, and use them as role models (Akers and Lee, 1996; Moore et al., 2002).

Accordingly, some studies have considered the extent to which peers influence an adolescent's advertising knowledge (Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998; Boush et al., 1994). Since peers are linked to a teen's social learning process, one factor thought to be influential is their susceptibility to peer influence or CSII (Boush et al., 1994; Bearden et al., 1989). Along these lines, Moore et al. (2002) found that peers' influence was a countervailing force to antismoking ads.

Boush et al. (1994) postulated a link between CSII and commercial ad skepticism, but found only partial support. Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) suggest that this is due to the two-dimensional nature of the CSII construct not being fully captured by the 3 items selected by Boush et al. (1994) from Bearden et al.'s (1989) measure. The normative dimension of CSII represents a willingness to comply with the expectations of others, and the informational one a willingness to accept and internalize

information gathered from others. Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) found significant support for a positive link between informational peer influence and commercial ad skepticism among adolescents, and for a negative relationship between normative peer influence and commercial ad skepticism.

We expect a different pattern of results for social ad skepticism relative to commercial ad skepticism. Social ads are by their very nature trying to discourage behaviors that are risky but seen as 'cool' (e.g., smoking), or to encourage behaviors that are effortful and/or unpleasant (e.g., blood donation, cancer screening). Peer influence which is normative or based on compliance with others' expectations (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Mangleburg et al., 2004) should push adolescents in the same direction as the messages contained in ads for products like cigarettes and alcohol, negatively affecting commercial ad skepticism. However, normative peer influence should lead to discounting of social ads that discourage risky behaviors, suggesting a positive effect on social ad skepticism.

Informational peer influence, on the other hand, does not result in teens feeling pressured to comply with peers' expectations. The information obtained from friends may not be congruent with the messages in commercial ads and thus may lead to skepticism of those ads, as found by Mangleburg and Bristol (1998). Conversely, discussion of social ad messages among teens should lead to message elaboration and retention, resulting in a negative effect on social ad skepticism. Hence, we posit that:

H1a. Susceptibility to informational peer influence positively affects commercial ad skepticism

H1b. Susceptibility to normative peer influence negatively affects commercial ad skepticism

H1c. Susceptibility to informational peer influence negatively affects social ad skepticism

H1d. Susceptibility to normative peer influence positively affects social ad skepticism

1.2. Parental influence: communication style

Parental socialization has been regarded as a force that aligns children's values with those of the surrounding culture (Moore et al., 2002). Social learning theory not only considers the impact peers have on a teen's behavior, but also takes into account parents' influence (Akers and Lee, 1996). Hence, it has been argued that parents must compete with other influence agents in order to have an impact on the attitudes of their children (Adams et al., 2001). Teens will consider both their parents' and their peers' views: Moore et al. (2002) found that teens actually preferred asking their parents about sexuality-related information rather than relying on their peers.

Parents can choose to be authoritarian, democratic/authoritative, or permissive (Adams et al., 2001). Communication style is often viewed in terms of two dimensions: socio-oriented and concept-oriented communication. Parents who adopt a socio-oriented communication style stress conformity, and usually monitor and control their child's consumption activities, thus leaving the child less opportunity to learn from experience. Conversely, concept-oriented parents communicate messages of autonomy to their children, encouraging them to question and prompting them to develop skills as a consumer (Austin, 1993; Boush, 2001).

Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) found a significant positive link between concept-oriented communication and commercial ad skepticism, but they found no support for a negative relationship between socio-oriented communication and commercial ad skepticism. In the context of skepticism of social advertising, it seems likely that parents who are concept-oriented are more likely to hear counterarguments provoked in teens by social ads and respond to them. This reinforcement by parents may result in teens being less skeptical of

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