Chapter 69
How Advertising Beauty Influences Children's Self–Perception and Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The authors investigate (1) whether the physical attractiveness stereotype applies to children, (2) whether children's self-perception is influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, (3) whether children's buying intentions are influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, and (4) whether age, gender, and materialism affect (1), (2), and (3). Results of an experimental research (N=185) confirm the presence of the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype in children. Attractive (versus less attractive) models were also perceived to be less likely to follow the rules. Contrary to expectations from research in adult samples, the presence of an attractive (versus less attractive) model has a positive influence on perceived physical appearance for both boys and girls and also a positive influence on general self-worth for girls. The authors also found that attractive (versus less attractive) models increase attitudes and buying intentions for boys, but not for girls. No effects of age and materialism were found.

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that children globally have an annual spending power of 300 billion dollar (mainly from pocket money and holiday jobs) and additionally influence the family purchase decisions for a number of products, which in turn additionally accounts for nearly 1.88 trillion dollar (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). Children are relying their consumption choices and purchase requests on a range of external stimuli, among which advertising (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra & Sharp, 2001). These advertising stimuli are prominent in children's lives: it is estimated that children see over 40.000 television commercials a year (Kunkel et al., 2004). Concerns about advertising to children have led to extensive research origi-

nating from a psychological, social, ethical, medical, political, juridical and economical perspective. The number of advertising methods used to target children are numerous: marketers incorporate bright colors, humor, catchy music and attractive models in their campaigns to attract children. Research using adult samples has shown that attractive (versus unattractive) models are rated more positive on other unrelated characteristics. This is explained by the physical attractiveness stereotype, also called the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype (Dion, Walster & Berscheid, 1972). This physical attractiveness stereotype has been observed in adult samples in different contexts (social and professional, Abramowitz & Ogrady, 1991; Cash & Kilcullen, 1985; Farley, Chia, & Allred, 1998) and different cultures (Chen, Shaffer & Wu, 1997). Several studies confirmed the presence of this physical attractiveness stereotype in children samples (e.g. Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz, 2010; Ruiz, Conde & Torres, 2005). This "what is beautiful is good" stereotype is learned at an early age and leads children, for example, to rate attractive (versus less attractive) children as more pleasant, popular and less prone to get into trouble and less attractive children to be more associated with negative social behaviors like aggression and fear (Bazzini et al., 2010). While research found that even babies of two to eight months old look longer at pictures of attractive (versus less attractive) people (Langlois et al., 1987) implying that to some degree the attractiveness stereotype is innate (Langlois, Roggman, & Rieser-Danner, 1990; Ramsey & Langlois, 2002), there is little doubt that, despite the biological propensity for the stereotype, the environment encourages the preference by means of socializing agents (e.g., peers, parents, caregivers, teachers), who expose children to their own values and beliefs. Furthermore, young children are exposed to increasing amounts of media sources. Popular culture (like movies and advertising) is a powerful educational force, teaching children cultural norms, regardless of parental background. Media contributes to the physical attractiveness stereotype by frequently encouraging associations between beauty and goodness. This association is especially true in advertising in which attractive models appear in positive settings (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011). In nearly 25% of the commercials, some form of attractiveness is present (Downs & Harrison, 1985). Even subtle messages in children's media become ingrained when children watch films over and over again, as children often do (Robertson, 1998). The movies children watch, for example animated children's movies, including Disney films, link beauty with goodness and happiness (Bazinni et al., 2010) and even pair beauty with intellect more than in adult movies. These associations keep the physical attractiveness stereotype alive and can make children infer that good things only happen to beautiful people, even though attractive women also have less positive qualities like higher levels of narcissism and have higher rates of divorce than do less attractive women (Kaner, 1995).

Much is unknown about the effects of this physical attractiveness stereotype in children. Our goal is to shed some light on the effect of this stereotype on evaluations, behavior and the self-perception of children. More specifically, we determine how advertising to children (aged 8-12) influences children's state of mind by presenting results of a study in which children are confronted with advertising using attractive (versus less attractive) models. We investigate (1) whether the physical attractiveness stereotype applies to children, (2) whether children's self-perception is influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, (3) whether children's buying intentions are influenced by the attractiveness of an advertising model, and (4) whether age, gender and materialism affect (1), (2) and (3).

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